

THEME AND TECHNIQUE IN THE NOVELS OF ROBERTO ARLT

by

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Introduction

Roberto Arlt was a newspaper reporter as well as a novelist. Spending most of his life trying to meet press deadlines, he did not have the temperament for carefully revising or pondering the creative portion of his work. He wrote hurriedly and in obscurity, paying more heed to his intuitive inclinations than to any objective criteria for good novel writing. He was more interested in presenting his highly personal interpretation of Argentine low life, a vision of metaphysical as well as social import, than in perfecting his novels technically. This casting aside of any semblance of literary finesse results in a novel which is strikingly powerful and innovative historically but uneven qualitatively. Some passages in Arlt contain unpolished prose, bad word choice, and even grammatical errors. Still others, such as the monologues of Erdosain in Los siete locos, approach brilliance both for their stylistic worth and for their metaphysical profundity.

Although Arlt has been well-known in his own country for years, only recently has he gained international popularity and consideration as a major precursor of contemporary Latin American fiction, especially that of the River Plate region. The Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal speaks of the influence of Arlt on Julio Cortázar.¹ Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann term Arlt the "first novelist in the new vein,"² meaning the first contemporary fiction

writer in all of Latin America. Whether or not one agrees completely with their assessment, there is little doubt that Arlt's role is that of an important innovator whose influence is still being felt today, particularly among writers of the River Plate.³ Harss and Dohmann beautifully describe what is original about Arlt's vision of porteño reality: "His crackpot idealists, deluded theologians, emasculated pimps and pariahs were inner figments, imaginative projections of a private vision of things. For Arlt the human predicament was not essentially social but philosophic and astronomical. This realization, the fruit of an absolute disconformity, helped him to cut deeper into the soul of his society than any other writer of his day."⁴

In Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas, two novels which are nightmarish visions of a tormented world seemingly ready to come apart at the seams, Arlt delves into the dark recesses of Argentine man and finds the source of his anguish. One has the feeling that this is the way man would appear if observed through a magical lens which somehow could only magnify and focus on the perverse and sick in the human condition. Arlt's novels constitute an uncompromising indictment of the effects on man of the twentieth-century phenomena of technical progress and urbanization. They are a spiritual landscape of a world gone mad.

Arlt wrote four novels and in each he showed his obsession with the perverse effects of Buenos Aires on the individual. His first novel, El juguete rabioso (1926), is for the most part a conventional work which finds its source in Naturalistic fiction. It is certainly Arlt's most structurally cohesive work. The control

exhibited in the novel probably results from the influence of Ricardo Güiraldes, under whose tutelage the young novelist worked for a while.⁵ Güiraldes forced Arlt to control his technique, and the product of this discipline is a novel which is both entertaining and aesthetically sound. Although this first novel is essentially conventional, Arlt does employ a few modern techniques such as interior monologue and some language fragmentation. El juguete rabioso is also modern in the sense that we see social problems as they affect the individual's psychological makeup.

Evidently the steadying influence of Güiraldes did not take, for Arlt's next two novels, Los siete locos (1929) and its sequel Los lanzallamas (1931), are bursts of creative energy whose technical diversity and metaphysical density are staggering when compared to El juguete rabioso. These two novels represent an expansion of Arlt's thematic and technical horizons. Their eccentric characters are marginal members of a spiritually bankrupt society. They provide a microcosm of the moral dissolution at the root of twentieth-century society. They are a pulse, a measurement of the grotesque effects on man of technical progress and urbanization.

The technical aspects of these two novels differ substantially from what is seen in El juguete rabioso. Because of his refusal to conform to conventional standards of novel writing, which he knew through his contact with Güiraldes, Arlt's second and third novels contain many techniques which are quite unusual for their day. Following his intuition, Arlt utilizes changing narrative perspectives, interior monologues, and fragmented structure. He is one of the first to employ these techniques in Latin America; although he

is not able to control them perfectly, he does manage to use them in a manner convincing enough to deserve commentary on their literary effects.

Arlt's fourth novel, El amor brujo (1932), is his least successful. There are portions of the work which show some of the innovativeness found in his earlier novels. The basic theme of El amor brujo, the deluding effect of the city on its inhabitants, is the same. The problem is that the concrete circumstance of the novel, the affair or attempted affair of a middle class engineer with a teenage schoolgirl, approaches silliness. The reader finds it difficult to take seriously all the adolescent carrying-on of the two would-be lovers. For this reason, it may be best to regard El amor brujo as a moderately successful satire of the traditional love novel.

Considered as a whole, the novelistic production of Arlt exhibits certain repeated themes. Perhaps the major theme is the inability of the individual to conform to the prevalent social standards and still retain his humanity. Urban reality is a repugnant perversion of man's dream for a better life. Instead of serving man's needs, the city, which is synonymous with twentieth-century civilization, enslaves and perverts him. Because of this situation, all of Arlt's characters are outsiders; they are non-conformists who have rejected the reality around them. Moreover, they all dream of a more fulfilling existence, but this is impossible in Arlt's world. It is this breach between their envisioned life and the naked truth of their circumstance that is the root cause of the terrible anguish the characters experience.

This does not mean that Arlt's novels are concerned solely with man's social situation. Indeed, man as a metaphysical being is the primary concern. To a great extent, Arlt's novels are existential in outlook. Although Argentina was the first Latin American country to become familiar with existential thought,⁶ Arlt himself was probably not aware of existentialism as a philosophy. Rather, Arlt's view of the human condition as revealed in his novels comes out of personal experience. Nevertheless, practically all of the elements of an existential view of the universe are present in his novels. Authoritative moral values do not exist in his novels. His characters move about in a chaotic and godless world which is devoid of purpose and meaning. They are condemned to create their own values out of nothingness. Science has destroyed faith and stripped reality of transcendental value by reducing it to a set of postulates that have nothing to do with man's deeper needs. Alienation from self and from others is a factor with which all the characters must deal. In a sense, the bleak, existential vision that Arlt gives of reality is all the more valid, for it is a vision that is embodied naturally within the novel and not a fixed body of ideas that is imposed on the work from without.

The writing of an urban novel which may be considered essentially existentialistic and the use of certain techniques normally associated with more contemporary novels marks Arlt as an important figure in the history of the novel in Latin America. Arlt was not a great literary theorist, however. He was a writer who worked intuitively, a total non-conformist who was appalled and bewildered by the social reality of his homeland. His novels are highly

subjective expressions of his own psyche. As a writer in this vein Arlt placed a great deal of emphasis on personal creativity. He was interested in discovering the truly significant and universal implications of the social disorientation, the spiritual inquietude, that afflicted his country and age.

The criticism on Arlt has been mostly of a thematic or psychological type. Much interest has been shown in the philosophical aspects of his works, and comparisons with Sartre, Jean Genet, and other existentialists are common. There is a general tendency to defend Arlt against those who claim he was a poor writer who advocated social revolution as a means of solving social problems. We believe that this polemic is a hangover from the old disputes between the aesthetically oriented Florida Group and its leftist counterpoint, Boedo, the group with which Arlt is most commonly associated. In the last few years this polemic has gradually tapered off, so that now many critics tend to discount Arlt's association with any literary or political group, pointing out that he had friends both in Florida and Boedo.⁷ In any case, it seems to us that the rebellious personality of Arlt automatically precludes the complete acceptance of any doctrinaire political or aesthetic stance.

The first major critical work on Arlt, Roberto Arlt, el torturado⁸ by Raúl Larra, was first published in 1950 and later expanded in 1956. Larra interprets the works of Arlt biographically, seeing the three protagonists of his novels, Silvio, Erdosain, and Balder, as extensions of Arlt's own personality. He also maintains

that the author's novels are intimately related to the social circumstance of Argentina in the twenties and thirties. The book is the most complete biography of Arlt. It is also useful as a source of Arlt's opinion of his own work.

Mirta Arlt, the daughter of the author, also sees Arlt's characters as extensions of the author's personality.⁹ Her comments are often of an elegiac nature, but she does shed light on the existential nature of her father's novels, relating them with the works of such contemporary writers as Sartre and Genet.

Nira Etchenique's book, Roberto Arlt,¹⁰ is another biographical interpretation of Arlt's novels that is in the same vein as Larra's study. Unlike Larra, Etchenique offers less documentation and critical analysis of the novelist's works. She also has a tendency to romanticize Arlt's life and works.

An essay by Juan Carlos Ghiano, "Personajes de Arlt,"¹¹ presents a synthetic view of the main characters of Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas. Ghiano sees Arlt's characters as blends of the pathetic and the ridiculous. Their very grotesqueness incites compassion in the reader. He also sees them in concrete-universal terms, for each reflects the universal human condition as well as the particular social circumstance of Argentina.

Adolfo Prieto, in "La fantasía y lo fantástico en Roberto Arlt,"¹² situates Arlt's novels within the Argentine genre of literature of the fantastic. He sees the roots of the fantastic in the author's imaginative ability as shown in the extravagant, fantastical world of Los siete locos. Prieto suggests that the world of the novel is "fantastic" because of its very unusualness,

its eccentricity. Prieto also comments on "Viaje terrible," an unpublished story of Arlt which is fully within the genre of the fantastic.

The most complete book on the themes of Roberto Arlt is Oscar Masotta's Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt.¹³ Masotta interprets Arlt in an existential context. He views the characters as alienated persons who are attempting to overcome the meaninglessness of their own lives through communication with their fellows. The formation of the secret society is an attempt to establish unity through common action. The characters' tragedy is their inability to be successful in any of their enterprises. Masotta also sees Arlt's novels as indirect indictments of middle class mores. The deluded characters reflect the perverseness of their social ambience.

Carmelina de Castellanos is not one of the better known critics of Arlt, and yet her little book, Tres nombres en la novela argentina,¹⁴ provides a good summary of Arlt's themes. She places Arlt fully within the modern tradition, relating his view of man and the city with that of the contemporary Argentine, Ernesto Sábato. She backs up her idea by doing a textual analysis of a key passage of Los siete locos.

In two essays entitled, "1926, año decisivo para la narrativa argentina," and "Arlt, El juguete rabioso,"¹⁵ Noé Jitrik considers Arlt's El juguete rabioso along with Güiraldes' Don Segundo Sombra and Quiroga's Los desterrados. For Jitrik, Arlt's first novel is important on two accounts. First of all, he claims it is the first novel to use the city as a backdrop for the action. Secondly, he points out that the social problems handled by Arlt are viewed

from an interior point of view. The reader perceives these problems as they personally affect an individual rather than a group or class.

David Maladavsky in Las crisis en la narrativa de Roberto Arlt¹⁶ analyzes Arlt from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis and sociology. Maladavsky sees two basic themes in Arlt: the Oedipus complex and death. The critic also uses his method to psychoanalyze Arlt as well as his characters. Another section of the book deals with the relationship of Arlt's novels to the sociological makeup of the society of his day. Maladavsky is particularly interested in how Arlt's novels reflect the great influx of European immigrants into Argentina after the First World War.

Angel Núñez studies Arlt by applying the literary theories of such diverse writers as Brecht, Sartre, and Wellek and Warren in La obra narrativa de Roberto Arlt.¹⁷ He provides an interesting theory on how Arlt creates aesthetic distance between the reader and the characters. There is also a good chapter in which Núñez analyzes El amor brujo from the viewpoint of structure. Using the classification of Wolfgang Kayser, he shows how the novel's structure is a variation on the typical structure of the love novel. Núñez' book also uses textual analysis with great effect.

Luis Gregorich's La novela moderna: Roberto Arlt¹⁸ is a brief but useful study of Arlt's life and complete works. Gregorich is the only critic who deals with the author's short stories and plays in relationship to his novels. For Gregorich the principal theme of Arlt's novels is the impotence of the individual faced with bourgeois society. The bizarre actions of the characters are motivated by a desire to overcome the debilitating effects of this

society on their lives. Gregorich believes Arlt significant because he deals with urban conflicts in the novel and uses modern psychology to explore the inner lives of his characters.

The literary historians Alberto Zum Felde¹⁹ and Jean Franco²⁰ agree that Arlt's modernity is basically due to the use of the urban environment as the scene of action. Both writers emphasize the tenuous line between insanity and sanity, fantasy and reality, which is found in Arlt's novels. Another literary historian, Enrique Anderson-Imbert,²¹ is the only critic who gives a totally negative assessment of Arlt. He sees the author as a literary aberration with a perverted view of man and society. For Anderson-Imbert, Arlt's writings are not only bad technically, but are also offensive morally.

From this brief summary one can see that most of the criticism on Arlt has been concerned with themes. Núñez is the only critic who has examined the technical aspects of Arlt's novels to any extent. The scope of his study is rather limited, however, because of his concentration on aesthetic distance. Nor does he devote much space to El juguete rabioso, Los siete locos, or Los lanzallamas, preferring to study Arlt's short stories and El amor brujo. Aside from the fact that we shall make detailed analyses of these three novels, our approach to Arlt's novels will differ substantially from Núñez' in another sense. We shall show how theme and technique are interdependent aspects of Arlt's fictional worlds. Arlt was a writer who worked on an intuitive level. As such, the various techniques he uses spring naturally from thematic necessity, and

not from a conscious imposition of a certain style on the novel. Arlt uses particular techniques because they conform well to the nature of the thematic content of his works. Indeed, one suspects that the thematic content of his works compelled him to use the techniques he did.

Technique is, of course, a broad term which covers many aspects of a fictional work. For our purposes we shall think of it as being particularly concerned with the use of structure and point of view not only as modes of delimiting organizationally and dramatically a work of art, but as means of achieving content. Thus when we speak of the themes in Arlt's novels, we speak of them as they are brought to a manifest state through structure and point of view.

It should be noted that in our analysis, we have avoided references to Arlt's biography as much as possible. We feel that this area of investigation has been adequately explored by such critics as Larra and Gregorich. In any case, whatever literary value is found in Arlt's novels is contained within the text itself, and not in any correspondence between the characters and the author's life. At all times our criticism is limited to those areas of the novel which we consider to be the most essential factor contributing to the work's effect on the reader.

Notes to Introduction

¹Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "La nueva novela latinoamericana," in La nueva novela hispanoamericana, ed. Juan Loveluck (Santiago, 1969), p. 346.

²Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers (New York, 1967), p. 16.

³Ibid., p. 174, p. 211.

⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁵Luis Gregorich, La novela moderna: Roberto Arlt, Vol. 42 of Capítulo: la historia de la literatura argentina (56 vols.; Buenos Aires, 1967), 988.

⁶Martin Stabb, In Quest of Identity: Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890-1960 (Chapel Hill, 1967), p. 169.

⁷For more information on this polemic see Gregorich, 988-89.

⁸Raúl Larra, Roberto Arlt: el torturado, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires, 1956).

⁹Mirta Arlt, prologue to Roberto Arlt, Novelas completas y cuentos (Buenos Aires, 1963).

- ¹⁰Nira Etchenique, Roberto Arlt (Buenos Aires, 1962).
- ¹¹Juan Carlos Ghiano, "Personajes de Arlt," Testimonio de la novela argentina (Buenos Aires, 1952), pp. 171-82.
- ¹²Adolfo Prieto, "La fantasía y lo fantástico en Roberto Arlt," Boletín de literaturas hispánicas, 5 (1963), 5-18.
- ¹³Oscar Masotta, Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt (Buenos Aires, 1956).
- ¹⁴Carmelina de Castellanos, Tres nombres en la novela argentina (Sante Fe, 1967).
- ¹⁵Noé Jitrik, "1926, año decisivo para la narrativa argentina," "Arlt, El juguete rabioso," Escritores argentinos: dependencia o libertad (Buenos Aires, 1967), pp. 83-94.
- ¹⁶David Maladavsky, Las crisis en la narrativa de Roberto Arlt (Buenos Aires, 1968).
- ¹⁷Angel Núñez, La obra narrativa de Roberto Arlt (Buenos Aires, 1968).
- ¹⁸Gregorich, 985-1006.
- ¹⁹Alberto Zum Felde, La narrativa hispanoamericana (Mexico, 1959), pp. 300-307.
- ²⁰Jean Franco, An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature (London, 1969), pp. 300-305.

²¹ Enrique Anderson-Imbert, Historia de la literatura hispano-
americana, Vol. II, 4th ed. (Mexico, 1954), 283-84.

Chapter I

El juguete rabioso

El juguete rabioso, Roberto Arlt's first novel, was published in 1926. The work was not well received by critics or the public and was completely overshadowed by the publication in that same year of Don Segundo Sombra by Ricardo Güiraldes. Although El juguete rabioso and Don Segundo Sombra differ in many aspects, they are similar in one: both works deal with a young man's attempt to find a place for himself in Argentine society. The manner in which the two authors treat this theme is, however, radically different, both technically and ideologically.

Güiraldes' narrator-protagonist, Fabio Cáceres, undergoes an educative process in which he acquires the physical skills and moral values necessary for a successful and satisfying life. In his excellent analysis of Don Segundo Sombra, Iván Droguett summarizes the end product of this educative process, a complete man at peace with himself and his surroundings: "Su alma, vale decir, sus sentimientos, pensamientos y voluntad, le indicarán el camino, la ruta a escoger en momentos de duda y los instrumentos para orientarse los tiene de tal manera calibrados que resulta imposible la equivocación. Ha adquirido un instinto de vida, fin y sentido de toda educación."¹ The values accepted a priori in Güiraldes' work are the traditional ones of hard work, bravery,

honor, and friendship. Exterior reality, in this case the pampa, is viewed as harsh but not unresponsive or unyielding to the man knowledgeable in the ways of the land and confident of his ability to adapt to his surroundings and overcome vicissitudes.

The fictional world of Güiraldes is basically optimistic. The very notion of the possibility of an educative process implies growth, expansion, and the ever present potential for effective action. America is viewed as the promised land where individual courage, zeal, and industry receive their due rewards, and Fabio Cáceres is an exemplary embodiment of these values.

Roberto Arlt, on the other hand, speaks with less certainty than does Güiraldes about traditional values. Silvio Astier, the narrator-protagonist of El juguete rabioso, is unable to experience a process of growth similar to that of Fabio. Instead of an orderly progression toward a definitive goal, Silvio's apprenticeship in life is a bitter initiation into a chaotic and indifferent urban reality. Instead of growth toward wholeness, he experiences diminution and ultimately spiritual fragmentation. Unlike Fabio, who discovers his roots and achieves unity with the earth, Silvio is left rootless without the security of well-defined moral precepts by which he can govern his life.

Thus, although Don Segundo Sombra and El juguete rabioso were published in the same year, we see in their comparison radically different views of Argentine society. The former work may be considered the culmination in the Argentine novel of the turn of the century movements of modernismo and mundonovismo; it effectively closes an epoch. On the other hand, the publication of El juguete

rabioso marks a transitional point in the Argentine novel, for Arlt's first novel may be considered a germinal work of that country's contemporary fiction.

The modernity of Arlt's novel is found in the philosophical framework in which the novel is grounded. The unsentimental and hostile urban world of El juguete rabioso bears testimony to the plight of modern man--his inability to reconcile the nature of his own being with his exterior surroundings. What we have in Arlt's novel is an inversion of the values found in such traditionalist novels as Don Segundo Sombra. Instead of an idealized, ordered, and rational world in which the individual has the capability of determining the course of his own life, Arlt's novel depicts a world which is indifferent to the anguish of man and prohibits the exercise of free will. Anguish and impotence are his birthright, and man is trapped within an irrational and immutable universe that offers no consolation nor viable alternatives.

Another aspect of El juguete rabioso which anticipates the contemporary novel is the psychological manner of presenting the protagonist. Although Silvio cannot be considered a great literary creation, Arlt does succeed in depicting the arbitrariness of the human psyche. The human mind is seen as anguish-ridden and infested with irrational obsessions. In commenting on this facet of the work, Noé Jitrik has observed that, "la novedad que implica El juguete rabioso es que los problemas sociales que maneja (Arlt) no están vistos de afuera, como curiosidad o como aberración propia de otros, sino desde adentro, sin renunciar al riesgo que implica examinar una realidad sin desentenderse personalmente de ella."² We may

expand on this observation and say that Arlt is more interested in the psychological reality and existential reactions of the protagonist rather than in the social problems themselves. The social implication is there, but it is subordinate to the presentation of the protagonist's inner life.

Thus, El juguete rabioso points toward a new epoch in the Argentine novel. Jitrik speaks of its historical significance: "Hasta 1926, las obras más importantes eran de ambiente campesino; la ciudad aparecía destañada e inocua, reflejo quizá de la mayor importancia demográfica de la campaña y del tradicional respeto por una estructura económica que reposaba en el campo y necesitaba idealizarlo; pues bien, con Arlt la ciudad se incorpora y absorbe intensidad estética hasta hacer anacrónico el tema rural en sí; ..." ³

In addition to the historical implications of the work, El juguete rabioso marks an essential step in the artistic development of Roberto Arlt, for this first work contains within it, in basic form, many thematic and technical elements which are brought to fruition in Los siete locos and its sequel Los lanzallamas.

As a work in itself, El juguete rabioso is singular among the novels of Arlt. It has a structural cohesiveness and linguistic simplicity that set it apart from the technical density of his other novels. The most interesting aspect of the work is the skill with which Arlt interweaves and makes mutually complementary the themes and techniques used to present them.

The novel is written in retrospective first person. It is divided into four chapters, each of which comprises a major episode

in the protagonist's life. These four chapters have a cumulative effect; Silvio learns bit by bit about the meanness and hypocrisy behind the facade of respectable Argentine society. Correspondingly, he himself undergoes a gradual moral and spiritual dissolution, and it is this progressive deterioration of the protagonist which provides the principal building block of the work's structure.

The basic movement of the plot is linear and chronological. It is not, however, the chance selection of episodes found in a picaresque plot. The seemingly straightforward narrative sequence is complicated by the internal relationships that exist between the four chapters. Structurally, these four sections are analogous to one another, and this similarity gives the work an organic form which reflects the thematic content. The dissolution of Silvio occurs as a step by step progression which is cruelly systematic in its deftness. (It should be noted that the structural configuration of El juguete rabioso is naturalist in character. In this respect, Arlt's first novel is quite traditional.) The effective stages of Silvio's dissolution may be seen at the end of each chapter.

In the first chapter, "Los ladrones," Silvio makes the frightful passage from childhood innocence to adulthood. He reads detective novels and is inspired to become a cat burglar, for he is excited by the seemingly romantic life of the criminal. He is compelled to abandon his exciting life of petty thievery, however, because of his fear of being captured by the police. He comes to realize that he is no longer a child indulging in playful mischief, but a thief alienated from "respectable" society and in danger of

imprisonment. As the chapter ends, this painful knowledge weighs heavily upon him, and in the final scene of the chapter Arlt skillfully suggests the melancholy felt by Silvio at this moment in his life.

The boys in the club discuss the imminent breakup of their organization. This last meeting is held in Enrique's room which has in it a puppet playhouse. The stationary figures of the contemplative boys are blended with those of the puppets who take on a life every bit as vital as that of the boys: "Estamos en casa de Enrique. Un rayo rojo penetra por el ventanuco de la covacha de títeres. Enrique reflexiona en su rincón, y una arruga dilatada le hiende la frente desde la raíz de los cabellos al ceño. Lucio fuma recostado en un montón de ropa sucia y el humo del cigarrillo envuelve en una neblina su pálido rostro. ... Yo estoy sentado en el suelo. Un soldadito sin piernas, rojo y verde, me mira desde su casa de cartón descalabrada."⁴ Silvio and Lucio decide to forsake their life of petty thievery, but Enrique will persist: "--Ustedes desisten, claro, no para todos es la bota de potro, pero yo, aunque me dejen solo, voy a seguir. En el muro de la covacha de títeres, el rayo rojo ilumina el demacrado perfil del adolescente" (p. 60). Later in the work we learn that Enrique is imprisoned because of an attempted swindle. When Silvio learns of Enrique's downfall he once again thinks of his old friend profiled against the puppet playhouse: "... Recordaba a Enrique. Me parecía volver a estar con él, en la covacha de los títeres. En el muro rojo el rayo de sol iluminaba su demacrado perfil de adolescente soberbio" (p. 148).

This equation of the boys with puppets implies a loss

of control of their own lives. The legless puppet "looking" at Silvio emphasizes the protagonist's lack of control of the direction his future will take. From this point on his life will be a downward spiral to final dissolution; as the title implies, he is a "mad toy" in the clutches of an indifferent reality.

This stage in the dissolution of Silvio is perhaps the most ominous of all in its overtones, for it marks an initial capitulation to social norms which dehumanize those who conform. By abandoning his life of petty thievery, the protagonist unwittingly trades freedom for enslavement. His life is no longer his own. In this situation lies the basic conflict of the work: the protagonist's struggle against his progressive spiritual deterioration. This conflict is realized concretely in Silvio's struggle against debilitating social norms and in his struggle against his own propensity for self-destructive action, a psychological tendency which finally overtakes him.

The second chapter, "Los trabajos y los días," relates his first bitter failure in an attempt to conform to bourgeois society. In the bookstore of the imperious Don Gaetano, the protagonist is unable to adjust to the humiliating and drab routine of his daily duties. In spite of his feeling of repugnance toward the job, he is powerless to resist the mutilating influence of his surroundings.

... Tenía la sensación de que mi espíritu se estaba ensuciando, de que la lepra de esa gente me agrietaba la piel del espíritu, para excavar allí sus cavernas oscuras. Acostábame rabioso, despertaba taciturno. La desesperación me ensanchaba las venas, y sentía entre mis huesos y mi piel el crecimiento de una fuerza antes desconocida a mis sensorios. Así permanecía horas enconado, en una abstracción dolorosa. Una noche doña María encolerizada me ordenó que limpiara la letrina

porque estaba asquerosa. Y obedecí sin decir palabra. Creo que yo buscaba motivos para multiplicar en mi interior una finalidad oscura. (pp. 95-96)

The "finalidad oscura" refers to Silvio's desperate attempt to burn the hated bookstore. Shortly before he learns of his failure, he conceives of himself as a man free of the shackles of an enslaving society: "Pero mi seriedad no me convencía. Sonaba tan a tacho de lata vacía. No, ni en serio podía tomar esa mistificación. Yo ahora era un hombre libre, y ¿qué tiene que ver la sociedad con la libertad? Yo ahora era libre, podía hacer lo que se me antojara..." (p. 100). For the protagonist, his attempted criminal act represents a declaration of his independence from a repressive society; it is an attempt to regain control over the course of his own life through exercising his own will.

His failure in this act is caused by an incredible stroke of fate: while washing dishes, Dío Fetente unwittingly splashes water on the ember Silvio has thrown and extinguishes the fire. The lack of a rational explanation for his failure emphasizes the protagonist's inability to take effective action of any kind. The course of his life is controlled not only by the exigencies of a dehumanizing society, but also by the laws of chance. The ensuing two chapters trace the unwilling fulfillment of a pattern of existence which is now indelibly engraved on the protagonist's life.

In the third chapter, "El juguete rabioso," Silvio's frustrations are intensified. Once again he attempts to enter into respectable society, in this case as an aviation mechanic for the army. His hopes are momentarily lifted by apparent success, but they are quickly and humiliatingly shattered. After a hopeless

effort at securing work on a transatlantic freighter, he decides to commit suicide. This third stage in the protagonist's dissolution is of a paradoxical character.

--Yo no he de morir... pero tengo que matarme--
y antes que pudiera reaccionar, la singularidad de esta idea absurda se posesionó vorazmente de mi voluntad.
--No he de morir, no... No..., yo no puedo morir
..., pero tengo que matarme.
¿De dónde provenía esta certeza ilógica que después ha guiado todos los actos de mi vida?
(p. 137)

In retrospect, the narrator-protagonist sees this paradoxical desire for self-destruction (a tendency which manifests itself here for the first time) as determinant in his life, but he is unable to account for its source. He is able to state the obsession that actively consumed him, but not its cause. His attempt at suicide fails and, as in his attempt at arson, Silvio is unsuccessful because of an incredible circumstance: his revolver misfires. Once again Silvio finds it impossible to take effective action of any kind. He is not even able to choose death, for the laws of chance seem to dictate that he must continue living his meaningless existence.

In the fourth chapter, "Judas Iscariote," the financial fortunes of Silvio decidedly improve when he takes up regular work as a salesman. In spite of his relative happiness with his economic situation and his admiration of Rengo ("... hombre más noble que he conocido," p. 176), he paradoxically decides to betray his good friend to the police. The two have plotted together to rob an engineer: "De pronto una idea sutil se bifurcó en mi espíritu, yo la sentí avanzar en la entraña cálida, era fría como un hilo de agua y me tocó el corazón. --¿Y si lo delatara?" (p. 175).

Like the idea of committing suicide, the thought of betraying Rengo is depicted as an active and impersonal agent which takes possession of the protagonist. At this point in the work Silvio's deterioration is so far advanced that he resigns himself to his self-destructive tendency. Indeed, he is able to view the act as spiritually beneficial: "--No me importa... y seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote. Toda la vida llevaré una pena... una pena... La angustia abrirá a mis ojos grandes horizontes espirituales... ¡pero qué tanto embromar! ¿No tengo derecho yo...? ¿caso yo? ... Y seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote..." (p. 178). He is now only a shell of a man, not only compelled to destroy himself spiritually, but also to justify the grotesqueness of what he is becoming. Silvio admittedly has lost any control over his will: "Y yo, ya no me pertenecía a mí mismo para nunca jamás" (p. 176). Thus, the final step in the protagonist's deterioration is resignation to a nihilistic propensity for self-destruction, the cessation of struggle against his spiritual dissolution.

Ironically, the betrayal of Rengo is an act which is socially good but personally despicable and destructive. By turning Rengo over to the police, Silvio fulfills his social duty of preventing crime. At the same time, he destroys himself, for his act is motivated by a pathological desire to commit a totally evil act. The "certeza ilógica" of the act reflects the thoughts of Silvio before his attempted suicide: "Tengo que matarme pero no he de morir." His betrayal of Rengo is the fulfillment of this paradoxical maxim, for Silvio continues to love, but he is dead inside.

In the preceding discussion of the anecdotal elements of El juguete rabioso we have pointed out the principal stages of the

dissolution of the protagonist. At the end of each phase of his life Silvio is more desperate than before, and he responds to his worsening circumstance in progressively desperate ways. The pattern of his life is consistent throughout the work. At the end of each phase (chapter) he must undo, reject everything preceding, and attempt to begin again. For Silvio, his life is an apparent incoherency; but to the reader, the pattern his life follows is that of attempted affirmation of self, subsequent failure, and another attempt at reaffirmation. The four chapters mark each principal stage of this recurring pattern. They comprise cycles in the life of the protagonist who is constantly retracing his steps, constantly reliving the pattern of his existence. Each failure leaves its mark on him as he becomes a more fragmented individual, less able to control his own life. This pattern becomes so firmly entrenched within the character of the protagonist that he is powerless to escape its enslaving concentricity. His pathological tendency to self-destruction grows in intensity until it ultimately possesses him.

The structure, then, of El juguete rabioso is based on four cyclical patterns which are organically related. The dominant structural element, Silvio, moves in time, changes geographical locations, but lives a repetitive design. The effect of this cyclical structure is the destruction of normal temporal progression. The past is constantly repeating itself and, instead of change in time, the protagonist experiences stagnation. This state of affairs is communicated by the analogous structural pattern of the four chapters. In this sense, the structure of the work reflects

and measures the problem of the protagonist--his inability to escape the exigencies of his progressive dissolution.

The cyclical nature of Silvio's existence as revealed through the structure of the work is also revealed in other ways: first, through the use of an extended metaphor and, finally, in a series of discursive pronouncements on the theme of the hopelessness of man's plight in the world.

In the opening scene of the second chapter the theme of the cyclical nature of existence appears metaphorically. Because of serious financial reverses, Silvio's family has been forced to move to a less expensive apartment in another barrio. The protagonist's mother urges her son to secure work so that his sister will be able to continue her education. Silvio resists the idea but finally relents. As the protagonist and his mother agonizingly discuss their problem, they hear in the background children at play who sing as they form a circle:

Cuánta desolación. La claridad azul remachaba
en el alma la monotonía de toda nuestra vida,
cavilaba hedionda, taciturna.
Desde afuera oíase el canto triste de una rueda
de niños:
 La torre en guardia.
 La torre en guardia.
 La quiero conquistar. (pp. 62-63)

This first image, characterized by a rather contemplative and ponderous tone, depicts the tedium felt by Silvio and his mother. The use of the adjective "hedionda" implies the decay and stagnation of their lives. The circle of children completes the image, suggesting the monotonous cyclical nature of existence.

This last theme is clarified when the image of the singing

wheel of children reappears.

Estábamos allí, inmóviles de angustia.
Afuera la ronda de chicos aún cantaba con
melodía triste:

La torre en guardia.
La torre en guardia.
La quiero conquistar.

Pensé:

--Y así es la vida, y cuando yo sea grande y
tenga un hijo, le diré "tenés que trabajar. Yo no
te puedo mantener." Así es la vida.--Un ramalazo de
frío me sacudía en la silla. (p. 64)

The frightful knowledge gained by Silvio in this scene is a
portent of the course of his future life. The repeated phrase
"así es la vida" implies the impotence of man to resist or alter
the closed system of life. This phrase recurs in the fourth chapter
and is once again used to express the hopelessness of struggling
against the human circumstance. Silvio has just learned from the
"rehabilitated" Lucio that Enrique is now in prison:

Con voz enronquecida, Lucio comentó:

--La struggle for life, che, unos se regeneran
y otros caen; así es la vida. ...

Cuando después de una aparatosa despedida me
encontré lejos, solo en las calles iluminadas, todavía
en mis oídos sonaba su enronquecida voz:

--La struggle for life, che... unos se regeneran,
otros caen... ¡así es la vida! (p. 148)

The exact nature of or reason for this immutable law of
existence is not fully explained. At one point the narrator
suggests that the sufferings of the young Silvio are simply necesi-
tated by the very fact of his birth. It is very much like the
Romantic concept of fate: "... Era necesario eso, sí, eso; era
necesario que mi vida, la vida que durante nueve meses había
nutrido con pena un vientre de mujer, sufriera todos los ultrajes,
todas las humillaciones, todas las angustias (p. 96). In the
final scene of the work, Silvio discusses with the Ingeniero Vitri

his betrayal of Rengo:

Con voz suave, replicó:
 --¿Y por qué está usted así?
 Un gran cansancio se apoderaba de mí rápidamente,
 y me dejé caer en la silla.
 --¿Por qué? Dios lo sabe. ...

 --Sí, es así ... Usted lo ha dicho. Es así. Se
 cumple con una ley brutal que está dentro de uno. Es
 así. Es así. Se cumple con la ley de la ferocidad. (p. 188)

Although this "ley de la ferocidad" is never fully defined, one can speculate that it is Silvio's self-destructive impulse. This impulse has ruled and will continue to rule the course of his life with brutal objectivity. Because of this psychological propensity he is unable to achieve spiritual wholeness. He is doomed to live a meaningless existence. Moreover, he is denied any type of spiritual solace, for the concept of God as an active factor in the affairs of man is disclaimed. Man is left naked before a despiritualized and impersonal universe. In a psalmlike interlude the narrator synthesizes the novel's desolate world view: "Algunas veces en la noche. --Piedad, quién tendrá piedad de nosotros: Sobre esta tierra quién tendrá piedad de nosotros. Miseros, no tenemos un Dios ante quien postrarnos y toda nuestra pobre vida llora. ¡Ante quién me postraré, a quién hablaré de mis espinos y de mis zarzas duras, de este dolor que surgió en la tarde ardiente y que aún es en mí? Qué pequeñitos somos, y la madre tierra no nos quiso en sus brazos y henos aquí acerbos, desmantelados de impotencia" (p. 166). The bleak outlook expressed here is typical of all of Arlt's novelistic production. All of his characters live in a hostile world ("la madre tierra no nos quiso") and are disenfranchised and alienated from themselves and from God.

This irrational universe in which man is a dispossessed and fragmentary being is reflected in the novelistic techniques used in the work. El juguete rabioso is written in retrospective first person and is Silvio's story in every sense, for he is both protagonist and narrator. Our concept of Buenos Aires and its inhabitants is totally determined by the narrator-protagonist's point of view. He sets the norm for reality as it is depicted in the work. The narrator does, however, manage to maintain a certain distance from his fictional world, for he does not usually protest or sympathize with the plight of the young Silvio. His attitude toward the past is one of resignation and hopelessness. Because he is speaking retrospectively of himself, he knows from the beginning the inevitable fate of the protagonist. Nevertheless, he is unable to explain the reason for his own downfall. Rather, he can only tell what happened, but not why: he can reveal his feelings about past events, but not judge them critically in a larger context.

A telling example of the speaker's incomprehension of the significance of his own life is the description of his disappointing visit to the house of Señor Souza.

Arrojé el cigarillo y pagando lo consumido me
 dirijí a la casa de Souza.
 Con violencia latían mis venas cuando llamé.
 Retiré inmediatamente el dedo del botón del timbre,
 pensando:
 --No vaya a suponer que estoy impaciente porque
 me reciba y esto le disguste.
 ¡Cuánta timidez hubo en el circunspecto llamado!
 Parecía que al apretar el botón del timbre, quería
 decir:
 --Perdóneme si le molesto, señor Souza..., pero
 tengo necesidad de un empleo...

La puerta se abrió.

--El señor... --balbucí.

--Pase.

De puntillas subí la escalera tras el fámulo. Aunque las calles estaban secas, en el quitabarros del umbral había frotado la suela de mis botines para no ensuciar nada allí.

En el vestíbulo nos detuvimos. Estaba oscuro.

El criado junto a la mesa ordenó los tallos de unas flores en su búcaro de cristal.

Se abrió una puerta, y el señor Souza compareció en traje de calle, centelleante la mirada tras los espejuelos, de sus quevedos.

--¿Quién es usted? --me gritó con dureza.

Desconcertado repliqué:

--Pero señor, yo soy Astier...

--No lo conozco, señor; no me moleste más con sus cartas impertinentes. Juan, acompáñelo al señor.

Después, volviéndose, cerró fuertemente la puerta tras mis espaldas.

Y otra vez más triste, bajo el sol, emprendí el camino hacia la caverna. (pp. 86-87)

In this passage the reader receives a series of fragmented impressions which are presented with paratactic abruptness. Paragraphs are short and laconic and we detect no particular process of subordination of clauses or subtle shading of effect. Moreover, the speaker is able to express his own timidity and reticence, but he leaves it to the reader to decide for himself the reason for Señor Souza's unexpected rejection. The narrator himself offers no explanation. He simply states the facts, this is what took place, as if to say it could not have happened otherwise. The effect of this stylistic mode is the creation of a nonsensical world where things simply are the way they are. In this type of closed circumstance there is no need for explanatory elaboration. Indeed, it would be impossible since reality, for the narrator, is in itself immutable and impervious to the efforts of men to control or analyze its impersonal ways.

The same stylistic abruptness also characterizes the relationships

between the larger divisions of the work. Between chapters II and III, and III and IV, there are no transitional paragraphs or sentences. The scene and the condition of the protagonist change abruptly. This predominant technique also characterizes the transitions between many smaller scenic divisions found within the body of each chapter. The scene and subject may change unexpectedly from paragraph to paragraph:

A mis oídos llegan voces distantes, resplandores
pirotécnicos, pero estoy aquí solo, agarrado por mi
tierra de miseria como con nueve pernos.

Tercer piso, departamento 4, Charcas 1600. Tal
era la dirección donde debía entregar el paquete de
libros. (pp. 91-92)

Thus, in its larger as well as smaller units, the work is characterized by a laconic abruptness which emphasizes the precipitate but meaningless changes in the protagonist's life. The normal relationships of cause and effect are absent in El juguete rabioso. The narrator presents reality in fragments, as if there were no particular relationship between succeeding events. The work quickly moves from one thing to another, and in this movement, it approximates the relentless pace of Silvio's plunge toward dissolution. This narrative mode also reflects the theme of the immutability of reality, for the lack of analysis of the causes of events implies that the reality of Silvio's life cannot be fully explained, at least not by the protagonist himself.

The use of first person narration also exercises an effect over the mode of existence of the secondary characters. Deep psychological probings are subordinated to representative traits. Enrique and Lucio represent two possible destinies for members of

lower class society in Buenos Aires. Don Gaetano and his wife represent the turbulent and miserable petit bourgeois marriage. Monti is a typical small-time capitalist. Of all the secondary characters, Rengo receives the most extensive and sympathetic treatment by the narrator, and this has the effect of adding pathos to Silvio's betrayal of this likeable person. Nevertheless, Rengo still remains a stereotyped ruffian of the lower class.

In contrast to the little emphasis given the other characters, Silvio stands out clearly on every page of the work. All scenes and delineations of characters are filtered through the eye of the narrator-protagonist. Every description, every concept of what is happening is an image of the inner life of the protagonist. In this sense, scenic elaboration functions at its most basic level, and the narrator-protagonist and the reality which surrounds him are intimately interwoven and mutually revealing. The following scene offers an example of this manner of presenting the protagonist's inner life:

Era una mañana gris. El campo se extendía a lo lejos, áspero. De su continuidad verde gris se desprendía un castigo sin nombre.

.....
Lloviznaba, y a pesar de ello un cabo nos condujo a hacer gimnasia en un potrero situado tras de la cantina.

No era difícil. Obedeciendo a las voces de mando dejaba entrar en mí la indiferente extensión de la llanura.

.....
Sentado junto a la cuadra, observaba la lluvia cayente a intervalos, y con el plato encima de las rodillas no podía apartar los ojos del arco de horizonte, tumultuoso a pedazos, liso como una franja de metal en otros y aleonado tan despiadadamente, que el frío de su altura en la caída penetraba hasta los huesos. (pp. 113-14)

The light rain and the pampa reflect the melancholy boredom of the protagonist ("continuidad verde gris"). The pampa may also be

considered an image of the indifference of the world to the sufferings of the protagonist ("indiferente extensión"). The fourth paragraph describing the sky serves as an image of the contradictory and warring spirit of the protagonist ("tumultoso a pedazos, liso como una franja de metal en otros").

The narrator also uses other devices to reveal the inner life of the protagonist. In sections which are separated from the main body of the text, the narrator meditates on the problems and anxieties that he encountered as a younger man and evidently is still facing.

The previously cited psalmlike interlude, "Algunas veces en la noche," serves as an example of this technique. In this meditation on the human condition the speaker retrospectively identifies himself with his former condition, and the implication is that the life problems he experienced as a younger man are still with him. The use of the pronoun "nosotros" shows that the narrator believes his former condition to be exemplary of the life problems of all men. These meditations have the character of a psalmlike lament for the sorrowfulness of the human condition. In this sense, Silvio is the only character in the work who projects beyond himself to universality, for his anguish which is conceived in concrete-universal terms is portrayed as a particular manifestation of a universal state.

Silvio also is revealed to the reader in his thoughts. He is the only character to whom the reader has direct psychological access. Most of these entrances into the mind of the protagonist come in the form of past tense descriptions. There are, however,

several times when the reader is introduced directly into the mental processes of Silvio. In the early parts of the work these passages, although "psychological" in nature, remain on the level of conscious articulation. At one point near the end of the work Arlt does succeed in capturing the unordered perceptions, the flow of the unconscious mind:

--No me importa... y seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote. Toda la vida llevaré una pena... una pena... La angustia abrirá a mis ojos grandes horizontes espirituales... ¡pero qué tanto embromar! ¿No tengo derecho yo...? ¿acaso yo?... Y seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote... y toda la vida llevaré una pena... pero... ¡ah! es linda la vida, Rengo... es linda... y yo... yo a vos te hundo, te degüello... te mando al "brodo" a vos... sí a vos... que sos "pierna"... que sos "rana"... yo te hundo a vos ... sí, a vos, Rengo... y entonces... entonces seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote... y tendré una pena... una pena... ¡Puerco! (p. 178)

The repetition of key words and the unconventional punctuation, which results in a certain degree of language fragmentation, combine to produce an effect totally unlike conscious articulation. The staccato rhythms and the insistent irrationality of the second passage simulate the flow of the unconscious mind, and the reader is able to see the actual mental processes of the character.

Because of these characterization techniques, Silvio is individualized to a greater extent than any other character in the work. He is the only character whom we know psychologically. Through this presentation we become aware of the process of Silvio's sufferings as he struggles against and then resigns himself to his situation. In comparison, the other characters remain in the background like shadows on a wall. The situation thus created implies that the stereotype, the dehumanized individual, is the product of an endemic antiindividualism that characterizes Argentine society.

In this sense, the dissolution of Silvio can be viewed as a step by step conformation to dehumanizing social norms. The end of the novel is especially revealing in this respect, for the protagonist's betrayal of Rengo represents a capitulation to socially acceptable but immoral and personally ruinous values. Out of gratitude to Silvio for saving him from being robbed, the engineer, Vitri, promises to arrange a job for Silvio in the south. Thus Silvio is finally accepted by respectable society (represented by Vitri), but in order to receive this acceptance, he has had to destroy himself by betraying his best friend. The implication is that respectable Argentine society is open only to the conformist, the person who is willing to submit to social norms no matter what the personal costs may be. In Silvio's case, the conduct demanded and even rewarded by society is in direct contradiction with the more human values of friendship, honor, and loyalty.

In El juguete rabioso content and technique are indivisible, each facet revealing the other. The major theme of the work is the hopelessness of ever realizing a fruitful existence within the social structure of Buenos Aires. This theme is not only made manifest through direct commentary, but also through the techniques of cyclical structure and a laconically abrupt mode of narration.

At the beginning of the novel the protagonist is filled with the idealism of youth. He imagines himself at the starting point of a great adventure into a world of heroic deeds. But in a series of analogous happenings, he deteriorates morally and spiritually, and, powerless to break free of the destructive demands of society

or of his own self-destructive impulse, he finally resigns himself to the senselessness of his existence. He is overwhelmed by his own psychological debility and by the inhuman exigencies of a rigidly stratified society.

A possible defect in the novel is Arlt's failure to explain fully the reason for Silvio's downfall. The protagonist's self-destructive propensity is not sufficient to explain all the misfortunes that befall the hapless character. At one point Silvio's problem seems to be a case of bad luck (his failures at arson and suicide); at another point he seems to be the victim of Naturalistic destiny (his rejection from the army and his seemingly gratuitous betrayal of Rengo); still at other times his adversity seems to result from flaws in the social structure (the bad time in Don Gaetano's bookstore). The implication that man is alone in a godless and chaotic universe (p. 166) without any ultimate purpose may be considered a partial explanation. Yet this idea is not fully developed; the insinuation is made and then dropped. The cyclical structure, quite akin to the traditional Naturalistic spiral, is another factor which may lead one to conclude that Silvio's downfall is due to scientific determinism.

The ambiguity on this point probably reflects Arlt's immaturity as a novelist and as a thinker about twentieth-century man's circumstance. As a transitional work and as a first novel, El juguete rabioso can not be classified as either a wholly traditional or wholly contemporary novel. There are touches of the contemporary, but at the same time there is much evidence of more traditional influences--the Naturalistic-like structure for instance.

Nevertheless, this first work contains many of the contemporary elements which are brought to fruition in Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas: the psychologically unbalanced individual who is alienated from himself and from established society, an ultimately meaningless universe, the incorporation of urban life as legitimate material for a novel, and the depiction of social problems as they affect the inner life of the individual member of society. To a lesser degree, some avant-garde techniques used by Arlt in his second and third novels, such as interior monologue and language fragmentation, are found in El juguete rabioso. In this sense, Arlt's first novel marks an essential step in his development as a creative artist. What he merely implies in El juguete rabioso is fully expressed in Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas.

Notes to Chapter I

¹Iván Droguett, "Antecedentes para la comprensión de Don Segundo Sombra," Signos, 1 (1967), 39.

²Jitrik, Escritores argentinos, p. 89.

³Ibid., p. 90.

⁴Roberto Arlt, El juguete rabioso (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 58.

All citations in the text are from this edition.

Chapter II

Los siete locos

Roberto Arlt's second novel, Los siete locos (1929), is the work with which the novelist is most often associated. The novel represents an ambitious, almost radical undertaking on the young author's part, for both technically and thematically Los siete locos is characterized by great multiplicity and density. It is a work of metaphysical reverberations that go far beyond anything expressed in El juguete rabioso, for in his second novel Arlt addresses himself to a broad spectrum of metaphysical inquietudes that afflict contemporary man. The thematic modernity and broader scope of the novel make it more universal and more immediately understandable to the present day reader. In a very real sense, Los siete locos is a prophetic novel, for in its constant allusions to war and threats of war, in its depiction of the terrible spiritual disorientation brought on by the advent of a society based on technology, and in its implicit advocacy of worldwide revolution as the only means of saving humanity from itself, the novel anticipates many of the themes of the contemporary novel in Latin America. Because of this modern outlook, Arlt's second novel deserves to be classed as a precursor of contemporary Latin American fiction.

Although Los siete locos and El juguete rabioso are quite different in many respects, there is a basic similarity between

the two works. Both deal with an anguished protagonist who is alienated from himself and from established society. The nature of each respective protagonist's reaction to his circumstance is different, however. In El juguete rabioso, Silvio's goal is to find a place for himself in Argentine society. His main concern is with his relationship to the social order, and his final spiritual dissolution comes about as a result of his inability to reconcile himself with the inhuman values of his social ambience. On the other hand, in Los siete locos, Erdosain, the protagonist, shows no desire to gain a position within the established social order. Indeed, Erdosain's only desire is to destroy the society that has so severely maimed him. He joins a secret revolutionary conspiracy whose stated goal is to enslave the whole world. Thus what was simply social discontent in El juguete rabioso turns into revolutionary fervor in Los siete locos.

Another aspect of Erdosain's character which differentiates him from Silvio is his intense commitment to a search for the metaphysical meaning of his existence. He seeks the experience of truth itself, an unequivocal view of the ultimate meaning of his life. Erdosain cannot state this metaphysical goal with succinctness since it is beyond expository language. He is merely able to define it with such vague phrases as "un acontecimiento extraordinario,"¹ "el país de la alegría" (p. 40), and "la verdad de nosotros mismos" (p. 95). The protagonist finally decides that the murder of his hated cousin, Barsut, will give him the experience he seeks: "Ver cómo soy a través de un crimen. Eso, eso mismo. Ver cómo se comporta mi conciencia y mi sensibilidad en la acción

de un crimen" (p. 89). This experience becomes the object of his quest, and when he thinks his cousin has been murdered, he ironically discovers that his life undergoes no change. He does not find the truth about himself he had hoped for.

It is not just that the object of Erdosain's quest is false or that truth is an unattainable goal. Rather, truth does not seem to exist at all in the world of the novel. The only thing the protagonist can discover is that there is nothing to discover. In the world of the novel one human pursuit seems to be as valid as any other; every human endeavor is ultimately meaningless.

One of Erdosain's aspirations is to make a "rosa de cobre." Through a process of electrolysis he hopes to be able to coat rose petals with copper and then sell the metallic flowers at a profit. Another aspiration is to open a "tintorería de perros." In themselves these goals imply Erdosain's desperate need to make fundamental changes in the nature of reality, an endeavor which is analogous to his need to radically change his own life. In any conventional sense these goals would be absurd, but in the world of the novel they are as meaningful as a quest for the meaning of one's life, since all paths eventually lead to nothingness. The moral trap in which the protagonist and the other characters find themselves is shown in the words of the "Rufián Melancólico." Erdosain asks him why he has joined the Astrólogo's secret society:

--Dígame... ¿Usted cree en el éxito de la empresa del Astrólogo?

--No.

--¿Y él sabe que usted no cree?

--Sí.

--¿Y por qué usted lo acompaña?

--Yo lo acompaño relativamente, y de aburrido que

estoy. Ya que la vida no tiene ningún sentido, es igual seguir cualquier corriente.

--¿Para usted la vida no tiene sentido?

--Absolutamente ninguno. Nacemos, vivimos, morimos, sin que por eso dejen las estrellas de moverse, y las hormigas de trabajar. (p. 57)

The devastating implication is that truth and falsehood, good and bad, are nonsensical terms in the world of the novel. The Rufián's words, which characterize in a general sense the world of Los siete locos, are a confession of the spiritual poverty of all the characters.

It is interesting that both Silvio of El juguete rabioso and Erdosain seek to change the essential nature of their lives. Both lead stagnated lives, and both seek to quicken their atrophied existences. We have already seen how the cyclical nature of Silvio's life makes real change impossible. Erdosain also experiences spiritual stagnation. Like Silvio, he seeks to take any kind of action, principally the murder of Barsut, which will free him from the fetters of his own inability to change the quality of his life. The attainment of such a change is impossible in the world of the novel, however. Oscar Masotta says of Erdosain's problem: "... su esencia o su naturaleza íntima le ha sido conferida, y que en adelante, haga lo que hiciere, sus actos nada podrán contra ella."² The law which seems to rule the world of the novel is the one stated by the Astrólogo: "... acuérdesese que en la tierra lo único que puede cambiar es el estilo, la costumbre, la substancia es la misma" (p. 95). Erdosain is the same person at the beginning and end of the novel. He is none the wiser for having set forth on his quest, and the only answer he finds to his life problems seems to be the bleak conclusion that it is impossible to find any answer.

At the end of the work the protagonist achieves a view of the total meaninglessness of his existence rather than an illumination of any kind.

The world depicted by Arlt in Los siete locos is a nightmarish world in which the actions of the characters seem to be pointless and useless gesticulations against the spiritual darkness surrounding them. Arlt himself is conscious of the pessimistic message of his book: "... la desesperación en ellos (the characters) está originada más que por la pobreza material, por otro factor: la desorientación que, después de la gran guerra, ha revolucionado la conciencia de los hombres, dejándolos vacíos de ideales y esperanzas. ... Se mueven como fantasmas en un mundo de tinieblas y problemas morales y crueles. ... Es verdad, buscan la luz. Pero la buscan completamente sumergidos en el barro."³ This bleak representation of the human condition is perhaps the most striking aspect of Los siete locos. Unlike El juguete rabioso, which confines its scope to a specific problem within the limited geographical framework of Buenos Aires, Los siete locos projects beyond itself to a more universal situation--the telling effect on society of the disintegration of traditional moral values after World War I.

This breadthwise expansion of thematic outlook in Los siete locos also signals a change in Arlt's concept of the novel as a genre. He goes from the primarily traditional style of El juguete rabioso to the fully contemporary style of Los siete locos. One of the most interesting innovations made by Arlt is his implication of the reader in the world of the novel through his handling of point of view. The narrative structure of the work forces the reader to

experience the same disorientation experienced by the characters. Because of the presence of an unreliable narrator and the multiple ambiguities underlying the narrator's relationship to the world about which he writes, the reader is forced to view the novelistic world as a character would view it. Just as the characters, and above all Erdosain, are uncertain about the true nature and significance of their own lives, the narrator is confused about the nature of reality in his world; the effect of his confusion is to draw the reader into the moral and spiritual disorientation of the novel's world. In effect, the narrative structure of Los siete locos forces the reader to identify with the life problems of the protagonist. When Erdosain stumbles, the reader stumbles with him and is implicated in the protagonist's search for the meaning of his existence.

We cannot know whether Arlt consciously set about to create such an effect. We believe that the unusual techniques employed are as much a result of chance as of conscious application of new literary procedures. The author is not a great theoretician who intentionally set about to revolutionize the novel in Latin America. He is a rebel who refused to conform to traditional criteria for the novel. In this sense, Arlt's revolt from the conventional novel is the instinctive reaction of a hypersensitive individual who is appalled by the grotesqueness of the society around him. The fact that he may have arrived at his novelistic techniques somewhat by chance does not detract from their importance, however. The very questioning of traditional novelistic form is of historical importance. Arlt's significance is not found in his artistic

perfection but in his attempt to radically modify, however accidentally, conventional novelistic structure and thematic material.

Thus Arlt's depiction of a character who experiences existential anguish as the result of his alienation from himself, society, and God, is not the product of a studied mastery of contemporary philosophy, but of the author's instinctive awareness that something is intolerably wrong with contemporary society's treatment of individuals. Likewise, the ambiguities underlying the narrative structure of Los siete locos are not due to a carefully calculated desire to be artistically innovative. Rather, the technique employed points out Arlt's refusal to control novelistic form even in its most rudimentary aspect. The multiple and often chaotic effects produced by this approach to novel writing, although displeasing at times, are interesting in that they approximate some of the narrative procedures of more contemporary novels--constant variations in narrative perspective and deliberate confusion of the reader about the limits between reality and fantasy in the world of the novel.

The narrator of Los siete locos is an anonymous person who views the action retrospectively. He is a character in the story, with his own peculiarities, prejudices, and weaknesses. He did not personally witness the events about which he writes. Rather, like a newspaper reporter, he is an ex post facto observer and has had to compile his report through a series of interviews with the characters. He often speaks of his personal relationship with the protagonist.

One of the results of the use of a character in the novel as the narrator is the implied loss of omniscience. Instead of viewing the action from the detached, godlike perspective of an omniscient narrator, the reader is plunged directly into the world of the novel. He must see things as a participant in this world sees them. There is no one standing outside the novel holding definitive knowledge of what may be termed "objective truth" about the action. In Los siete locos the reader is faced with a reality which is relative to how the characters and the fictional narrator conceive it, whatever their strengths or foibles may be.

The narrator refers to himself as "cronista" or "comentador," never as "autor" or "narrador." By using these terms to define his relationship to the narrative, he implies he is only an intermediary between the reader and the events of the novel. He is saying that he did not actually create the world about which he writes. Rather, he sees himself as a purveyor of facts. This implied objective relationship to the story is deceptive, however, for he does express definite opinions about the protagonist.

In the section "Ingenuidad e idiotismo" the narrator speaks of his personal relationship with the protagonist:

El cronista de esta historia no se atreve a definirlo a Erdosain, tan numerosas fueron las desdichas de su vida, que los desastres que más tarde provocó en compañía del Astrólogo pueden explicarse por los procesos psíquicos sufridos durante su matrimonio.

Aún hoy, cuando releo las confesiones de Erdosain, paréceme inverosímil haber asistido a tan siniestros desenvolvimientos de impudor y de angustia.

.....

Hablaba sordamente, sin interrupciones, como si recitara una lección grabada al frío por infinitas atmósferas de presión,...

.....

Impasiblemente amontonaba iniquidad sobre iniquidad. ...
(pp. 111-112)

One detects in the above passage a rather moralistic tone. The use of the words "impudor" and "siniestro" implies the narrator's moral outrage. He is shocked by the protagonist's apparent indifference to the depravity of his life ("Impasiblemente"). This inference is borne out later in the same section. Erdosain explains his very prudish courtship of his wife, Elsa, to the narrator. He never kissed her or used the familiar "tú" with her. The narrator reacts strongly to what he considers the protagonist's unforgivable indifference to his "sinful" life: "En tanto hablaba, yo le miraba a Erdosain. ¡El era un asesino, un asesino, y hablaba de matices del sentimiento absurdo!" (p. 112).

The important thing to note here is that the text does not confirm the previously cited statement of the narrator: "El cronista de esta historia no se atreve a definirlo a Erdosain. ..." The very act of making moral judgments is a process of definition and implies anything but objectivity in outlook. His description of Erdosain's manner of speaking ("como si recitara una lección grabada al frío") reflects the narrator's tendency to think of the protagonist as something less than human. At the beginning of the novel he refers to Erdosain as "una cáscara de hombre movida por el automatismo de la costumbre" (p. 23). At other times the narrator's description of Erdosain is inhumanly grotesque: "Su vida se desangraba. Toda su pena descomprimida extendíase hacia el horizonte entrevisto a través de los cables de los 'trolleys' de los tranvías y súbitamente tuvo la sensación de que caminaba sobre su angustia convertida en una alfombra. Así como los

caballos que, desventrados por un toro se enredan en sus propias entrañas, cada paso que daba le dejaba sin sangre los pulmones" (p. 34). There is a certain impassivity, an excessive clarity and unemotional bluntness, an almost inhumanity in the concluding comparison of Erdosain's spiritual pain with the physical pain of a horse which has been gored by a bull.

The effect of the narrator's point of view is to dehumanize the protagonist, to make him an object rather than a human being with whom one can sympathize. Angel Núñez singles out the creation of distance between the reader and the protagonist as a constant in the novelistic technique of Arlt: "Pues bien, la técnica narrativa de Roberto Arlt implica una reacción de distanciamiento del lector. ... Arlt con sus sorpresas aleja de nosotros a los protagonistas, incitándonos a juzgarlos y convierte la sociedad ciudadana--cuya vida nos muestra definitivamente enferma--en un objeto de severas críticas."⁴ Following in this pattern, the narrator of Los siete locos represents Erdosain as an animalistic incarnation of anguish and depravity. There is scarcely a page in the work in which the narrator does not represent the protagonist as a tortured and nefarious person.

The aesthetic effect, as pointed out by Núñez, is the creation of distance between the reader and the character. This aesthetic effect also reflects one of the principal life problems of the protagonist. He is a totally alienated man who is unable to establish any meaningful human relationship with any of the other characters. The inability of the reader to identify intimately with Erdosain reflects this theme of the protagonist's alienation.

Concomitantly, the reader is led to a fuller understanding of the terrible isolation in which the protagonist lives.

We can see how the distance created between the reader and the protagonist results from the narrative point of view, for the reader's perception departs from the narrator's norms. Thus, although the narrator writes under the guise of objectivity, he does impose his own norms upon the narrative. His moral judgments, his opinion that the protagonist is "una cáscara de hombre," his very choice of adjectives, are all intrusions of the narrator's personal voice into the narrative. He seems to have omniscience in relation to the protagonist's inner life, thus violating his literal condition as a character in the story. The effect is to place the reliability of the narrative in doubt. One must always bear in mind that, due to the narrator's moral condemnation of the character, the information he receives about Erdosain is prejudiced and possibly unreliable. The very fact the narrator of Los siete locos has the status of a literary character instead of an omniscient observer implies his fallibility. He has been reduced to a human level and, as a human with human foibles, he is subject to errors in judgment. There is the vexing possibility of discrepancies between the narrator's representation of the character and his authentic nature. This possibility of unreliability in the narration is even more discernible in the stratified narrative structure.

In the fictional world of the novel the narrator gathers his information through interviews with the characters. His primary source seems to be Erdosain, although he had evidently interviewed some of the other characters; his comprehensive knowledge of the events often surpassed what Erdosain could possibly have known.

The information gathered by the narrator is then synthesized and passed on to the reader. This multileveled narrative framework suggests in itself an attack on reality as one might ordinarily conceive of it in the novel. If the characters are really insane as the title indicates, and if indeed the "cronista" must depend on them for his report, how does he know if his information is factual? Does the narrator, in fact, speak for the authentic reality of the characters and events in the novel? These questions are left unanswered, and the reader's confidence in the documentary value of the narrator's report is undermined. It is as if the narrator had interviewed patients in a mental hospital and then tried to determine from their responses what they did the day before.

The purpose of this rather elaborate narrative artifice is to break down the reader's conventional notion of what is real in the work. We can see how the narrative structure forces one to distinguish between the "true" reality of the characters and events, which is a fictional hypothesis in itself, as opposed to their representation in the work. In short, the work is a fictional representation of another fiction; it is like a Chinese box, and the bewildering fact is that the reader can never know this other fiction except by inference. He is deliberately confused about the limits between fiction and reality in the work. His confidence in what the narrator says is weakened and the narrator's point of view is nullified as a reliable norm for the judgment of characters and situations.

The reality, then, of los siete locos is equivocal, and, because of the nature of the narrative structure, the confusion

can never be resolved satisfactorily. The resulting disorientation of the reader is not, however, a gratuitous betrayal of his confidence. Rather, the reader is made to feel confused; the irony of the narrative technique is directed against him so that he can appreciate more fully the dilemma of the characters. For in his confusion the reader receives a view of the obscure, despiritualized universe where the characters live out their troubled existences.

In the section entitled "Discurso del Astrólogo," the Astrólogo speaks of the plight of modern man:

Interesa poco. Lo enorme es esto: la humanidad, las multitudes de las enormes tierras han perdido la religión. No me refiero a la católica. Me refiero a todo credo teológico. Entonces los hombres van a decir: "¿Para qué queremos la vida?..." Nadie tendrá interés en conservar una existencia de carácter mecánico, porque la ciencia ha cercenado toda fe. Y en el momento que se produzca tal fenómeno, reaparecerá sobre la tierra una peste incurable... la peste del suicidio... ¿Se imagina usted un mundo de gentes furiosas, de cráneo seco, moviéndose en los subterráneos de las gigantescas ciudades y aullando a las paredes de cemento armado: "¿Qué han hecho de nuestro dios?..." (pp. 139-140)

The Astrólogo's assessment of the modern world bears testimony to the twentieth century phenomenon of the downfall of absolute values. Technology has tended to strip reality of any inherent transcendental meaning, and man's life is in danger of becoming a series of actions of a "carácter mecánico." (This recalls the narrator's description of Erdosain: "una cáscara de hombre movida por el automatismo de la costumbre.")

The Astrólogo's discourse outlines in synthetic form the situation confronting the characters in Los siete locos. They are forced to create their own values in a world divested of meaning.

In this world, conventional value judgments are not valid because there is no norm ("credo teológico") upon which to base a moral or philosophical decision. The Astrólogo explains this to Erdosain: "Necesitamos de una religión para salvarnos de esa catástrofe que ha caído sobre nuestras cabezas. ... Si usted creyera en Dios no habría pasado esa vida endemoniada, si yo creyera en Dios no estaría escuchando su propuesta de asesinar a un prójimo. Y lo más terrible es que para nosotros ha pasado ya el tiempo de adquirir una creencia, una fe. Si fuéramos a verlo a un sacerdote, éste no entendería nuestros problemas y sólo acertaría a recomendarnos que recitáramos un Padre Nuestro y que nos confesáramos todas las semanas" (p. 95).

The moral dilemma for the characters is to choose a valid course of action in a despiritualized universe. Even murder ("asesinar a un prójimo" refers to the planned murder of Barsut) may be coldly considered since the value of human life is not a moral absolute. The characters have been set free to fend for themselves in a spiritual vacuum, and, in order to fill this emptiness, they have created their secret society.

The moral dilemma faced by the characters is posed for the reader in the narrative technique. Just as the characters have no "credo teológico" nor "Dios" to guide their lives, the reader has no authoritative narrator on whose judgment he can rely. In his study of Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, Erich Auerbach points out the traditional role of the narrator in narrative fiction. His succinct comments are pertinent to our discussion here: "Goethe or Keller, Dickens or Meredith, Balzac or Zola told us out

of their certain knowledge what their characters did, what they felt and thought while doing it, and how their actions and thoughts were to be interpreted. . . . And what is still more important: the author, with his knowledge of an objective truth, never abdicated his final and governing authority."⁵ The reliable narrator of traditional fiction imbued his work with his own value system. He provided the reader with an objective norm by which one could judge the action.

Arlt's more modern technique is radically different from the one described by Auerbach. In Los siete locos there is an open abandonment of "objective truth" or "certain knowledge" both as a thematic principle and as a rhetorical device. The effect is to make the reader's experience of the world of the novel a more personal one. Just as the "objective truth" about the lives of the characters is forever denied the reader, likewise are the characters denied the "objective truth" about themselves and their world. Even the Astrólogo, the leader of the society, is unable to explain his actions: "¿Para qué inventó Einstein su teoría? Bien puede el mundo pasarse sin la teoría de Einstein. ¿Sé yo acaso si soy un instrumento de las fuerzas superiores, en las que no creo una palabra? Yo no sé nada. El mundo es misterioso" (p. 149). Thus, the Astrólogo's bafflement is also the reader's, for both he and the character are denied final illumination.

It may appear that one cannot possibly learn anything from reading Los siete locos. The novel seems to be ambiguous in every way; it does not seem to "tell" us anything about life except that it is an enigma. Wayne C. Booth in his Rhetoric of Fiction

discusses in general terms this type of novel which he calls "nihilistic fiction." His observations shed light on the intentions of the narrative technique of Los siete locos.

If the world of the book is without meaning how can there be a reliable narrator? What is he to be reliable about? The very concept of reliability presupposes that something objectively true can be said about actions and thoughts. To call Job a "perfect and upright" man is nonsensical unless perfection and uprightness are meaningful terms in a meaningful universe. The slightest intrusion of commentary by someone not caught in the same meaningless trap in which the characters find themselves will call the reader's attention to the deceit that underlies any such work. What is more, it will diminish the reader's emotional involvement in the plight of the lost souls of the book. If there really is no light to illumine our journey, then any kind of reliable insight will reduce the impact of our wanderings.

Booth's commentary adequately describes the narrative situation in Los siete locos. We have already seen in our previous discussion the "meaningless trap in which the characters find themselves." And, if Booth is correct in his judgment, the imaginary narrator should be found to be caught in the same trap. He, too, should be one of the "lost souls of the book." If it were otherwise, there would be an inherent contradiction between form and content in the work.

In view of these general remarks, the question arises: in what instance or way does the narrator of Los siete locos definitively prove himself unreliable? How and when is it revealed that he is "caught in the same meaningless trap in which the characters find themselves"? This ultimate unreliability of the narrator is revealed in his relationship to one of the principal motifs of the work: the interplay between fantasy and reality.

In An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature, Jean Franco points out the tenuous dividing line between reality and fantasy in Los siete locos, noting that the mixture of "real contemporary events--war in China, strikes etc..." with the "mad fantasies" of Arlt's characters tends to obliterate the difference between reality and fantasy.⁷ We may also note that there are recurring comparisons between the secret society and the movements of Mussolini in Italy and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Thus, seen in the light of contemporary events, the movement of the Astrólogo and his followers does not seem extravagant. Franco says: "Reality, in fact, outstrips fantasy."⁸ Moreover, the novel seems disturbingly prophetic of the catastrophic horrors that were to grow out of the German economic depression of the 1920's.

This blurring of the borderline between reality and fantasy which pervades the work is carried through in the character of Erdosain. Repulsed by the sameness and hopelessness of his life, the protagonist escapes into a fantasy world of "acontecimientos extraordinarios" (p. 23). He rests his hopes on the dream that a rich person will pity him and rescue him from his economic deprivation. At other times his fantasies assume the form of self-inflicted punishment ("El humillado"). At another time he goes into a trance in which his anguish is almost sexual in its cathartic effect ("Capas de oscuridad"). The frequency of these mental fantasies disorients Erdosain, making it difficult for him to determine the difference between objective reality and the fantasy reality of his mind. He explains his problem to the narrator:

"Un aniquilamiento muscular extraordinario, una ansiedad que no termina nunca. Usted cierra los ojos y parece que el cuerpo se disuelve en la nada. ... Usted siente que va cortando una tras otra las amarras que lo ataban a la civilización, que va a entrar en el oscuro mundo de la barbarie, que perderá el timón. ... Hasta me doy cuenta de que hablo tanto para convencerme de que no estoy muerto, ..." (p. 121). The protagonist's struggle is to keep himself oriented toward reality, to avoid a definitive plunge into the murky world of his consciousness.

His eagerness to enter into the conspiracy of the Astrólogo and his willingness to commit a crime reflect Erdosain's need for concrete action that will affirm the reality of his existence. He explains: "yo mismo estoy descentrado, no soy el que soy, y, sin embargo, algo necesito hacer para tener conciencia de mi existencia, para afirmarla" (p. 89). This "algo" is, of course, the murder of Barsut.

Quite often the images used to describe Erdosain also imply physical insubstantiality: "Hubiera querido tener un espejo frente a sus ojos para ver su cuerpo asesino, tan inverosímil le parecía (el yo) quien con tal crimen se iba a separar de todos los hombres" (p. 197). The apprehension of Barsut and the anticipation of his death produce a physical pleasure in Erdosain. He encounters anew the world of physical sensations and becomes conscious of his own existence: "Y el placer que la mañana suscitaba en él, el goce nuevo, soldaba los trozos de su personalidad, rota por los anteriores sufrimientos del desastre, y sentía que su cuerpo estaba ágil para toda aventura. --Augusto Remo Erdosain--tal como si pronunciar su

nombre le produjera un placer físico, que duplicaba la energía infiltrada en sus miembros por el movimiento" (p. 131).

The crime then, in Erdosain's view, would be an empirical confirmation of his existence. Instead of having to dream about an "acontecimiento extraordinario," he would experience one concretely. His mental fantasies tend to negate his empirical existence, and he vacillates between the poles of psychological fantasy and objective reality. Because of his need for the extraordinary and the fantastic in life, the protagonist is often unable to discern or even accept the difference between his delusive conception of reality and the objective nature of his circumstances. This confusion is especially true of his participation in the conspiracy.

The protagonist, believing himself a trusted and therefore fully informed member of the Astrólogo's group, accepts at face value the declarations of the members. He is constantly amazed to find out that what he believes to be true is a lie. Erdosain naively believes the Buscador de Oro's story about finding a lake of colloidal gold, and he is profoundly shocked to discover that such a lake does not "really" exist. He considers the Astrólogo's entrusting of Barsut's check to him a sign of their deep friendship and mutual trust but is unaware that the Mayor has been assigned to follow him to and from the bank. The protagonist also sees in Hipólita a sympathetic, almost maternal, spirit; in a footnote, however, the narrator explains that the prostitute is really using Erdosain's willingness to confess in order to blackmail the Astrólogo. The final irony directed toward Erdosain is the

feigned murder of Barsut by the Astrólogo and his associates.

The concept that Erdosain has of reality is a fabrication of his own mind. What seems objectively real is actually only a fantasy growing out of his need for extraordinary events in his life. Although the mentally deranged protagonist is certainly disposed to this kind of mistake, his confusion is very often perpetrated and maintained by the other members of the society (the death of Barsut, for example). In this sense, Erdosain is a victim of the Astrólogo's conspiracy rather than an active participant as he believes. The Astrólogo says: "... los hombres de ésta y de todas las generaciones tienen absoluta necesidad de creer en algo" (p. 145). He goes on to say that these men "serán la carne de cañón de nuestra sociedad" (p. 148). Thus, in the society, the protagonist fulfills the symbolic role of the great mass of men who will be the unwitting cannon fodder of the new order, the believers in the "mentira metafísica" of the society.⁹

In relation to this interplay between the real and unreal, reality and fantasy, the narrator seems cognizant of the difference between Erdosain's view of reality and his true circumstance. He seems to give a comprehensive view of the action that enables the reader to transcend Erdosain's distorted and limited view of reality. Whenever the protagonist enters into the fantasy world of his mind, the narrator is careful to point out the spurious nature of these mental meanderings (See, for example, "Estados de conciencia" or "Dos almas"). When Erdosain believes that Barsut has been murdered, the narrator informs the reader in a footnote that Barsut's death is a sham contrived by the latter and the Astrólogo (p. 262). The

effect of this privileged knowledge on the reader is to shore up his confidence in the ability of the narrator to discern the difference between Erdosain's view of reality as opposed to what is actually transpiring.

As he tells his story, the narrator tries to appear detached and not personally involved in the world of the novel. He describes one of the many mental fantasies Erdosain has: "Se imaginaba que desde la miralla de la persiana de algunos de estos palacios lo estaba examinando con gemelos de teatro cierto millonario 'melancólico y taciturno'. (Uso estrictamente los términos de Erdosain)" (p. 41). The narrator's parenthetical remark implies an attitude of emotional and intellectual superiority toward the character. It is as if the narrator were reminding the reader that he, unlike the protagonist, is not given to such mental absurdities. In a sense, the narrator is ridiculing Erdosain, and there is a tone of disdainful tolerance in his remark.

The intended effect of the narrator's detached attitude is to increase his credibility with the reader through the projection of an image of non-involvement. He gives the impression he is looking down upon the action, that he, unlike Erdosain, is not subject to mental fantasies or delusions about the true nature of reality. He even uses footnotes to clarify the action, and the very notion of footnotes implies scholarly objectivity and lucidity.

We see, then, that the narrator goes to great pains to establish himself as a reliable observer of and guide through the confused world of the protagonist's mind. The reader is led to

believe that the narrator's view of reality transcends Erdosain's. A sense of complicity between the imaginary narrator and the reader is created when the narrator indicates that he and the reader do not share Erdosain's delusions about the nature of reality. The protagonist stumbles, but the narrator and the reader do not; the apparent effect is to direct the irony of the narrative against Erdosain. However, it is, in reality directed against the reader since at the end of the work the reader learns of the narrator's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

In the section "El suicida," Erdosain sees a man commit suicide. Previous to this happening he had spent several hours at the feet of Hipólita, in whom he found a certain maternal comfort. On leaving his apartment, he "reconoció con alegría que tenía hambre" (p. 249), implying that he has once again become conscious of his physical existence and is not lost in the fantasy world of his mind. He enters a cafe and orders a cup of tea. He then slips into a reflective mood and apparently drowns and dreams, his head resting on the table. In the midst of his mental reveries he is awakened by the odor of cyanide:

Un amargo olor a cianuro llegó hasta él; y percibiendo a través de los párpados la lechosa claridad de la mañana, sintióse diluido como si se hallara en el fondo del mar y la arena subiera indefinidamente sobre su chozo de plomo. Alguien le tocó la espalda.

Abrió los ojos al tiempo que el mozo del café le decía:

--Aquí no se puede dormir.

Iba a replicar, mas el criado se apartó para ir a despertar al otro durmiente. Era éste un hombre grueso, que había dejado caer la calva cabeza sobre los brazos cruzados encima de la tabla de la mesa. (p. 251)

The "otro durmiente" is the man who has committed suicide by taking cyanide.

It should be noted that the sleep of Erdosain is interrupted by an odor and the waiter, thus drawing the reader's attention to the physical reality of the protagonist's awakening. The reader assumes that he is no longer witnessing an event imagined by the protagonist, but an actual happening. After discovering the man is dead, the police are immediately called and Erdosain is interrogated. Upon learning the identity of the dead man (he is a fugitive murderer), Erdosain realizes he has read about him in the newspaper: "Entonces Erdosain, al escuchar estas palabras, recordó como si hiciera mucho tiempo que lo hubiera leído. (Y sin embargo, no era así. La mañana anterior se había enterado en un diario)" (p. 252). The parenthetical remark of the narrator, which corrects Erdosain's perception of time, once again implies the narrator's superiority over the protagonist. Unlike Erdosain, the narrator indicates he is not subject to temporal confusion. For the reader, the narrator's comment is a reminder that the latter is still aware of the discrepancies between Erdosain's perception of reality and objective reality. In short, the narrator, as he has done so often, reaffirms his role as a meticulous purveyor of facts. The reader is made aware that the narrator, with his preeminent vision, has retained his position as a reliable interpreter of the action.

After the incident in the cafe, Erdosain leaves and catches the train to Temperley where he meets the Astrólogo. From there he proceeds to cash Barsut's check and then to witness the "murder" of his hated cousin. After this the protagonist is exhausted and sleeps for twenty-eight hours. He is awakened by the Astrólogo, who questions him about the suicide in the cafe:

--Usted dormía que parecía un muerto. Nunca he visto a nadie dormir así, con tal cansancio, hasta con el olvido de las necesidades naturales... pero, a propósito, ¿de dónde sacó usted esa historia del suicida del café? He visto los diarios de ayer a la noche y de esta mañana. Ninguno trae esa noticia. Usted la ha soñado.

--Sin embargo, yo puedo enseñarle el café.

--Pues sonó en el café, entonces.

--Puede ser... no tiene importancia... ¿y eso?

(p. 264)

The effect of this placing in doubt Erdosain's experience in the cafe is to place in doubt the narrator's reliability. The reader "knows" that the story of the fugitive's crime is public knowledge; the narrator even confirms the day in which the story appeared in the newspaper. That such a sensational follow-up story of the criminal's suicide is not carried in the newspapers is inexplicable according to the Astrólogo. And if the reader accepts the Astrólogo's suggestion that Erdosain dreamed the incident in the cafe, the inevitable conclusion is that the narrator's report was erroneous. Another possibility is that the Astrólogo is deliberately misleading Erdosain. In any case, the ambiguity of the situation is not resolved. The narrator does not follow his usual pattern of intruding to clarify the difference between Erdosain's perception of reality and the "true" reality of the action, and the reader is left confused and uncertain about the reality of the event in the cafe.

The implications of the last section are disconcerting because it is implied that the narrator does not apprehend reality any more fully than the protagonist does. The narrator is apparently as deluded about the nature of reality as the protagonist is; he is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. He is, perhaps, one

of the book's "siete locos" who is caught in the grey area where fantasy and reality merge. In this respect, the narrator and the protagonist participate in the same dilemma as they move together through a series of events which are ambiguous in their relation to the contingencies of fantasy and reality.

For the reader, the implications of the last section of the work are staggering. The effect of the implied unreliability of the narrator is to break down the reader's very convictions about the nature of truth itself in Los siete locos. If the narrator is truly one of the "lost souls of the book," the entire narrative could possibly be the fabrication of his muddled mind. The work itself could be a fantasy invented by the "cronista."

It is interesting that the implied demise of the narrator does not occur until the last pages of the work. This final moment comes as a dramatic illumination, a realization that ultimately the world of the novel, the created reality of the work, is ambiguous in its relationship to fantasy and reality, and truth and falsehood. It should be noted that the reader's realization occurs at the same time as the feigned murder of Barsut occurs in the novel. When the character stumbles, the reader stumbles with him; the ironies of the narrative structure work against the reader much as the society works against the protagonist. Thus, for both the protagonist and the reader, the end of the novel is not a resolution but an intensification of conflict. The end does not resolve tension, it creates it; the reader is left to choose for himself the truth of the work.

Thus, just as Erdosain is ignorant of the true nature of

reality, so is the reader; the implication is that any attempt to know or represent reality in any objective sense is inevitably doomed to failure. This is the underlying assumption guiding the work both in theme and technique, and, to the extent the reader is deceived by the narrative technique, he is a victim of a deception similar to the one perpetrated upon the protagonist by the society. Indeed, the full force of the irony of the work would be directed toward the ingenuous or careless reader. This reader would be unaware of the tacit ambiguousness underlying the representation of reality in the work, just as Erdosain is unaware of the discrepancies in his view of reality.

We see, then, in Los siete locos an interplay between fantasy and reality, truth and falsehood, which is dizzying in its effect. A general motif of ambivalence about the borderline between fantasy and reality is implied in the stratified narrative structure. This borderline is further blurred through the comparisons of real contemporary events with the fictional society. Ambivalence about the nature of reality is demonstrated concretely in the protagonist who is unable to transcend the fantasy world of his own mind and make valid judgments about the reality in which he lives. At first it appears that the narrator has the ability to clarify the confused vision of the protagonist, but, since he is also limited by his status as a character in the world of the novel, he shows himself to be as confused as the protagonist about reality.

For the reader, the demise of the narrator signifies the loss of an authoritative norm in the world of the novel; the reader has no foundation on which to base his judgments about the characters

and situations in the novel. The loss of the narrator's point of view as the governing norm of the work is reflected in the characters' lack of a "credo teológico" around which they can orient their lives. Viewed in this light, the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader are placed on the same plane. All three perceive reality incompletely; each shares in the meaninglessness of the other's plight since each is denied an unequivocal view of the reality of the world of the novel.

The questions raised by the narrative structure of Los siete locos are both metaphysical and aesthetic in nature. The diminution of the narrator to the level of a character in the novel theoretically limits his point of view. He was not present when the events in the novel occurred, yet his report is not confined to what he could have gotten through interviews with the characters. Indeed, the inner life, the psychological state of the characters, especially of the protagonist, is the principle concern of the narrator. But when he enters directly into the minds of the characters, when he represents the modes of consciousness of the characters in direct and indirect interior monologues, the reader knows that the narrator has gone beyond what he could have known as an ex post facto observer. Enrique Anderson-Imbert concludes that these entrances into the minds of the characters are defects in the narrative technique: "En Los siete locos, por ejemplo, no se sabe quién narra. A veces, es un autor omnisciente, a veces un cronista que comenta las confesiones--orales y escritas--de Erdosain, a veces Erdosain mismo; ..."10

The character narrator has omniscience in relation to the psychological reality of the characters, and if one requires a novel to be narrated in a totally "logical" manner, then this variation in privilege could certainly be considered a defect in the novel. Nevertheless, if one considers the variation in privilege in light of Los siete locos's world view, it may be concluded that this phenomenon reinforces the idea of the novel as a fantasy of a confused narrator. Furthermore, without these inside views of the characters, the work would be little more than a historical document or newspaper account of a rather bizarre occurrence. The very essence of the novel's effect lies in the relationship of the narrator's consciousness to that of the protagonist. In this sense, the variation in the narrative point of view may be considered justifiable. Once again, one cannot say with certainty if Arlt intended to produce such an effect, or if he arrived at it by chance.

Another problem presented by the narrative structure of Los siete locos is the unexpected change in focus toward the end of the book. After consistently confining his inside views to the mind of Erdosain, the narrator suddenly changes his focus to give an inside view of the Astrólogo in "Sensación de lo subconsciente." After this section there are other entrances into the minds of Hipólita and Ergueta. As in other cases, one may simply use this inconsistency as another example of Arlt's lack of control over his technique. As a novelist who wrote on the level of instinct, Arlt was not concerned about finesse. On the other hand, this sudden change in focus does anticipate the sequel to Los siete

locos, Los lanzallamas. One of the major differences in the two works is the broader more expansive focus of the sequel. Whereas Arlt deals almost exclusively with the life of one man, Erdosain, in Los siete locos, he deals with an entire society in its sequel. The ideas and techniques found in the first novel receive further development in the second novel, and the change in focus toward the end of Los siete locos is preparatory to this amplification.

Compared to the rest of his production, Los siete locos is Arlt's most memorable work. The author succeeds in representing the terrible psychological disorientation caused by a society based on technology. The madness of the characters and their cynical capacity for evil is a frightening commentary on the dehumanizing potential of urban society. After reading the turgid pages of the novel, one has the feeling that he has taken a trip into a labyrinthine world of moral degeneracy and lunatic agony.

Notes to Chapter II

¹Roberto Arlt, Los siete locos (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 23.

All citations in the text are from this edition.

²Masotta, Sexo y traición, pp. 31-32.

³As cited by Larra, Roberto Arlt, pp. 54-55.

⁴Núñez, La obra narrativa, p. 28.

⁵Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1968), pp. 535-36.

⁶Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1968), p. 299.

⁷Franco, An Introduction, p. 304.

⁸Ibid.

⁹The secret society itself is based on the tenuous borderline between fantasy and reality. The Astrólogo realizes that although his plans are "fantastic," to anguished men such as Erdosain the society will seem quite viable. The very use of the term "mentira metafísica" is disconcerting. Is one to assume there is a "verdad metafísica"?

¹⁰Anderson-Imbert, Historia, 283-84.

Chapter III

Los lanzallamas

Los lanzallamas, the sequel to Los siete locos, molds its novelistic world from the same group of characters used in the first novel. The theme of Los lanzallamas is the same as the theme of its predecessor: the search for meaning in an absurd world. Like Los siete locos, Los lanzallamas depicts a nightmarish world in which men live pointless existences that are devoid of transcendental value. Anguish is the stuff of life, meaninglessness the eternal quality of all human endeavor.

In order to depict this troubled world, Arlt employs in Los lanzallamas the same device of the unreliable narrator that he used in Los siete locos. This device results in a similarly equivocal view of reality in both novels. In general terms the concepts we discussed in relation to the narrative artifice of Los siete locos are also applicable to Los lanzallamas.¹ There is no reliable narrator who establishes a set of norms by which one may judge the characters and events of the novel; the world of Los lanzallamas, like that of Arlt's second novel, is somewhere between reality and fantasy. In spite of this fundamental similarity in the narrative artifice of the sequel, the device of the unreliable narrator is handled somewhat differently in Los lanzallamas.

The narrator of Los siete locos appears as a character in the

first third of the novel and makes his presence felt often thereafter. On the other hand, the narrator in Los lanzallamas does not appear as a character until the end of the work. In the third to the last section, "El homicidio," he uses exactly the same words to describe his relationship to the protagonist that the narrator used in "Ingenuidad e idiotismo" in Los siete locos.² This repetition of such a key passage reminds the reader in a most emphatic way that the narrator of Los lanzallamas is indeed the same unreliable "cronista" found in the first novel.

Up to this point the narrator exhibits even more omniscience than he did in Los siete locos. He moves from scene to scene at will, delving into and interpreting the minds of all the characters. The scope of the narrator's point of view is considerably more inclusive in Los lanzallamas than in Los siete locos. In one section, "La agonía del Rufián Melancólico," the "cronista" even penetrates into the thoughts of the semi-conscious and delirious mind of the dying Rufián. Throughout the novel the narrator takes privileges normally associated with the godlike perspective of an omniscient narrator. The "cronista's" extreme violations of his temporal and spatial limitations reinforce the idea that the world of the novel is the fantasy of a disoriented and perhaps devious mind. Indeed, the total, almost startling omniscience displayed by the narrator in Los lanzallamas completely destroys any confidence the reader might have in the veracity of the narration.

A case in point is the rather extensive treatment given the relationship between Hipólita and the Astrólogo. There are numerous scenes in which the two characters are alone, and yet in the next to

the last paragraph of the novel the narrator comments that the two have disappeared without a trace: "Hipólita y el Astrólogo no han sido hallados por la policía. ... Ha pasado ya más de un año y no se ha encontrado el más mínimo indicio que permita sospechar dónde puedan haberse refugiado."³ If we accept the "cronista's" statement here, we must conclude that the scenes depicting the two characters alone are a fabrication. Their relationship exists only in the sense that it is imagined by the narrator. The implied "deceit" here and the others we have already discussed have fascinating ramifications in the area of Arlt's attitude toward the novel as a literary genre.

Wolfgang Kayser, in his essay "Origen y crisis de la novela moderna," speaks of a crisis of confidence in the validity of the novel as an adequate medium for the representation of the human condition: "Existe además una crisis interna y real de la novela. Fundamentalmente, esa crítica ha sido provocada por los mismos novelistas, ... Se ha adoptado una actitud de desconfianza frente a la novela tal como venía presentándose hasta ahora, frente a la novela 'convencional.' Ya no se la considera auténtica, la cual quiere decir: no se cree que es una expresión fiel de la relación actual con respecto a la existencia y el ser."⁴ Kayser also notes that the advent of the modern novel, from the Quijote onward, slowly brought about a crisis of confidence in the value of language.⁵ The word came to be viewed as an ambiguous phenomenon with many strata of meaning. In the contemporary period, writers have come to view language as an obstacle rather than an aid to communication. One critic points out that such writers as Cabrera Infante and

Julio Cortázar attempt in their novels to overcome what they judge to be the limiting quality of language used in a conventional sense.⁶

Roberto Arlt anticipates the preoccupations of these contemporary novelists, for he is also aware of the limiting and potentially deceitful property of language. The Astrólogo says: "Y la verdad, la verdad es el río que corre, la piedra que cae... El postulado de Newton... es la mentira. Aunque fuera verdad; ponga que el postulado de Newton es verdad. El postulado no es la piedra. Esa diferencia entre el objeto y la definición es la que hace inútil para nuestra vida las verdades o las mentiras de la ciencia. ¿Me comprende usted?" (p. 23). The attempts of man to impose a rational order upon his world or to capture the essential reality of life through language are useless, for language is its own reality and is forever alienated from the essential reality of the universe. There will always be a gap between "el objeto y la definición." For the Astrólogo, the world is dualistic; man is doomed to disunity, for life and language are irrevocably alienated realities.

Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas is demonstrative of the Astrólogo's idea. Within the world of the novel as it is embodied in the narrative artifice, the reader is irrevocably alienated from the object, the essential reality of the lives of the characters. The language of the "cronista," his definition of the reality about which he writes, creates a barrier the reader cannot penetrate. In the vocabulary of the Astrólogo, the novel would be Newton's postulate, while the true reality of the characters' lives would be the rock that falls. It is not so much that language fails as a

symbolic medium of communication, but the fact that language and the truth of the human condition are two separate realities, each with its own inherent contingencies.

It is curious that Arlt should use a novel to carry on an indirect polemic against the validity of the genre and its primary material, language. In such obscure matters as these, it is difficult to arrive at any safe conclusion about what the author "really" means. The reader can only judge what he believes to be the literary effect of the work. Arlt does not seem to miss any opportunity to remind the reader that what he is reading is a linguistic fantasy that has little to do with the "real life" of the characters. One detects a gleeful deceitfulness throughout the two novels, for the reader is forced to play a literary game he can never win. Yet, in spite of or because of the maddeningly ironic nature of the narration, Arlt makes some affirmative statements about the novel in general.

The implication that the world of the novel is a fabrication of language having little to do with the true reality of the characters' "real lives" is actually an affirmation of the totally fictional quality of the narrative. In Arlt's two novels the created world of the novel is an "absolute" fiction, an inwardly shaped and formalistic linguistic phenomenon with its own inherent interrelationships. In effect, the superiority of the fictional representation over "real life" is implied, for "real life" is itself a fictional hypothesis in the stratified narrative artifice of the two novels. In this sense, language ceases to be a symbolic medium for "real life" and becomes instead a self-sufficient reality

in its own right. The narrative artifice of Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas makes it impossible to conceive of a direct relationship between the world of the novel and "real life." Such an approach would lead nowhere, for the "cronista" creates rather than documents reality.

In this sense, Arlt's Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas anticipates many of the problems being dealt with by such contemporary writers as Julio Cortázar and Cabrera Infante in their novels. Arlt's use of an unreliable narrator is not in itself particularly innovative. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the device as it is employed in the two novels under discussion go beyond point of view in the narrowest sense of the term. The stratified narrative framework and the "cronista's" blatant violation of his temporal and spatial limitations have all the attributes of an indictment of the conventional novel with its self-assured philosophy of man, reality, and the overall function of art. One detects in Arlt's two novels the beginnings of a ferment that is still being realized today. The very validity of the novel as an expression of the human condition is questioned. Can the novel be an authentic representation of the truth of existence and being? This is the core of the crisis precipitated by Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas.

That Arlt's novel implies such a radical concept is probably due as much to chance as to a conscious attempt on the author's part to create a new novelistic form. Arlt was not a theorist, but rather a nonconformist who chose to follow his intuition rather than traditional canons for the novel. In the prologue to Los lanzallamas he defends the right of the novelist to write any kind

of novel he chooses: "Crearemos nuestra literatura, no conversando continuamente de literatura, sino escribiendo en orgullosa soledad libros que encierran la violencia de un 'cross' a la mandíbula. Sí, un libro tras otro, y 'que los eunucos bufen'" (p. 12). This type of rebellious reaction to the established literary culture of his time results in a novel which is a highly personal expression unfettered by rigid exterior controls. The emphasis is placed on the writer's personal intuition of what a novel ought to be. This highly subjective quality of Arlt's novels is one of the things that makes him prophetic, for his rejection of conventional novelistic form implies a disbelief in its adequacy as a medium for the depiction of the spiritual disorientation of modern society.

One of the criticisms leveled against Arlt is his supposed lack of "artistic sensibility." Enrique Anderson-Imbert says: "El empuje de Arlt tenía, desgraciadamente, graves fallas artísticas. Escribía mal, componía mal."⁷ Carmelo M. Bonet echoes Anderson-Imbert when he says: "Roberto Arlt fue un escritor de garra malogrado por su facilidad y 'quemado' en la dura faena del periodismo."⁸ We believe this criticism to be misguided and attributable to a failure to understand fully Arlt's novel. As we have already seen, the narrative artifice of Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas is "unconventional" but aesthetically justifiable if one takes into account the overall artistic effect. For Arlt, the novel is a free and open genre not necessarily tied to the forms of the past. His sequel seems to reflect the dictum of the Spanish novelist Pío Baroja concerning the novel: "La novela es un género multiforme,

proteico, en formación, en fermentación. Lo abarca todo ... todo absolutamente."⁹

Of the two novels under discussion, Los lanzallamas in particular pushes conventional novelistic form to the limit. It is characterized by discontinuity, multiple points of view, and long digressions that are seemingly misplaced. For example, there is a section dedicated to Erdosain's plan for a poison gas factory, complete with a drawing of the equipment. In another long digression Elsa recounts the story of her tragic life with Erdosain. There are other sections devoted to the Espila brothers who have little to do with the principal action. There is also a section in which Erdosain has a vision of a World War I soldier who is suffering from the effects of poison gas. Other characters, such as the Abogado and the anarchists, appear in one section and then are dropped never to reappear. This chaotic structure¹⁰ challenges the reader's ingenuity. The structural configuration of the novel seems to be an amorphous mass in constant but undisciplined expansion. The structural principles of balance in characterization and unity of plot have gone by the wayside.

On the most elemental level the structural disunity of Los lanzallamas is in accord with the world of the novel--the fragmentary structure reflects the fragmentary lives of the characters. Arlt himself suggests this in his prologue when he makes a rather whimsical apology for not having written a novel in the tradition of Flaubert: "Me atrae ardientemente la belleza. Cuántas veces he deseado trabajar una novela que, como las de Flaubert, se compusiera de panorámicos lienzos...! Mas hoy, entre los ruidos de

un edificio social que se desmorona inevitablemente, no es posible pensar en bordados" (p. 11). The delicate neatness and aesthetic balance of the traditional novel are no longer appropriate forms for the novelistic representation of the chaotic world of the twentieth century. A new and different type of novelistic structure is called for, and the fragmentary, unbalanced structure of Los lanzallamas exemplifies this new concept of structure in the novel.

One critic has noted that structure in the conventional sense of the term is no longer a preoccupation of many contemporary Latin American novelists.¹¹ He also contends that "an insistence on structure is, in effect, a way of regulating and limiting an artistic work."¹² In this sense, the lack of a tightly knit external organization is not necessarily an artistic deficiency in the work. In such novels as Tres tristes tigres, which lack a balanced structure, he indicates "it would be better to speak of the patterns which emerge within the narrative fabric of the novel."¹³ These observations concerning the contemporary Latin American novel are equally applicable to the loose structural configuration of Los lanzallamas.

Although the exterior organization of Arlt's novel is uneven, it does compensate for this lack of structure with interlocking internal patterns. Los lanzallamas grows and shapes itself from within rather than having an exterior organization imposed upon it from without. It should be understood, however, that we do not mean to imply that Los lanzallamas is a totally unified work, even in the sense of internal pattern. Diffuseness and disunity characterize the work and should be considered basic aspects of the

novel. Los lanzallamas was written by an undisciplined auto-didact who was uninterested in the finer points of literary craftsmanship such as tight exterior organization. It is an ambitious book that attempts to depict an entire society on the edge of chaos. As such, it is a fragmentary compendium of human diversity.

There is one factor in the novel which may be considered pervasive: the mood of desperation and hopelessness. Anguish is the lot of all the characters, whoever they are; it is the atmosphere in which all move, breathe and have their being. In a sense, anguish is the prime mover of all the action.

Wylie Sypher in his Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature points out the intimate relationship between the artistic cinema and the other arts in the twentieth century.¹⁴ This correspondence, Sypher observes, is especially evident in the use of a "composite perspective" of reality as opposed to a perspective from a "fixed angle."¹⁵ Robert Humphrey in his Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel notes that one of the principal cinematic techniques frequently employed in prose fiction is the "space-montage" device.¹⁶ In the "space-montage" the time element remains static or unspecified while the spatial perspective changes. Several events in different geographical locations are seen as concurrent. The result is a multiplistic view of reality within one temporal period. Reality, instead of being represented as a chronological series of events, is viewed as a juxtaposition of several concurrent events. The reality of a temporal period is broken down into its component

parts and then rejoined into a multidimensional fixed stasis.

Los lanzallamas reflects this correspondence between the two art forms. The structure of the novel is quite similar to the cinematic device of space montage. As is shown in his novels, Arlt was keenly aware of the cinema. Frequent allusions to the medium are made throughout the work. A citation from the text shows that he appreciated the artistic possibilities of the "camera eye" in the novel:

Son las cuatro de la tarde. Erdosain permanece tieso, sentado frente a la mesa. Si fuera posible fotografiarlo, tendríamos una placa con un rostro serio. Es la definición. Erdosain permanece sentado frente a la mesa, en el cuarto vacío, con la lámpara encendida sobre su cabeza.

.
Las manos están apoyadas en la tabla. Pero él no mira sus manos. Mira al frente. El muro. Sin embargo, en un momento dado retira de la mesa la mano derecha. La retira con la misma lentitud que emplearía un ajedrecista que acerca su mano a un peón y no se atreve a moverlo... Sus párpados bajan y sus pupilas se detienen en la mano que se movió. La mira con extrañeza. (pp. 186-87)

In a type of close-up, the focus of the narration changes from an overview of Erdosain seated at his desk to the subtleties of the movement of his hand and eyelids. The comparison of the scene with a photograph, the use of visual imagery, the short, clipped phraseology, and the use of verbs in the present tense, all add to the cinematic quality of the passage. This passage is to a great extent representative of Arlt's style throughout the work, for the reader often has the impression he is viewing the action through the eye of a camera. This consciousness of the cinema as an adjunct to novelistic technique is reflected on a larger scale in the structural relationships of the novel.

The intricate, diffuse structure of Los lanzallamas, the constantly changing narrative focus and the ensuing temporal simultaneity of certain events are analogous to the previously mentioned device of space-montage. A consideration of the first chapter in the light of this device is particularly revealing. This chapter, "Tarde y noche del día viernes," comprises eight sections, each section or group of sections taking place in various parts of Buenos Aires. The temporal intricacies of the organization of the eight sections are staggering. A summary analysis of the many cross references in the first chapter will reveal that several sections are concurrent in time. The action in the first section overlaps with the action in the second, third, and part of the fourth section. The fifth section occurs at the same time as the sixth and seventh, the seventh at the same time as the eighth section. The chapter is a temporal labyrinth of interlocking passageways, a tapestry woven with time. From section to section, the narrative focus brusquely changes while the chronological perspective becomes more and more complex. There is also an interior-exterior movement in the focus, for the narration moves from the depiction of the interior reality of some characters to scenes consisting mostly of dialogue. The implications of this employment of the cinematic device of the space-montage are far-reaching, for it signifies a break with the nineteenth-century structural forms generally considered characteristic of the Latin-American novel in the 1930's.

Instead of a well-made novel in which structure is made to conform to the exigencies of chronological time and point of view

is controlled and consistent, Los lanzallamas demonstrates a much freer and more open novelistic form. Time and space are flexible rather than unalterable mediums in the novel. They are discounted as irrevocable contingencies. Past, present, and future are intermingled and superimposed upon one another, and the result is an expansive, multifaceted view of a relatively short period of time.

One of the effects of this type of structural configuration is the nullification of the reader's sense of time as a sequential continuum. Rather, time in Los lanzallamas is an all-encompassing medium, a density in which the characters are trapped. Their primary problem is their inability to effect a meaningful change in their lives. Time moves forever onward, but they do not progress with it. This realization precipitates Erdosain's suicide: "La vida es un bloque que tiene la consistencia del acero, a pesar de su movilidad" (p. 213). Like Silvio in El juguete rabioso, the characters of Los lanzallamas stagnate spiritually, and the montage structure of the work, which deprives the reader of any sense of continuous, sequential movement, reinforces this theme.

It is interesting that after the first chapter temporal references become less and less exact. The actual time that elapses in the work is three days. Nevertheless, due to the paucity of temporal references and above all due to the temporal discontinuity of the various sections, the reader's sense of the passage of chronological time is almost completely destroyed whereas an interior sense of the weight of time is all-encompassing. Chronological time, as it is measured in the chapter headings ("Tarde y noche del día sábado" and "Día domingo"), becomes an intellectual concept totally

irrelevant to the deeper reality of the characters.

This loss of a sense of the movement of chronological time is reflected in the structure of the last two chapters of the work. The space-montage device noted in the first chapter receives its fullest treatment in the last two chapters. The work proceeds by agglomerating disparate and seemingly unrelated incidents. As far as the orderly development of plot is concerned, the rest of the work is a series of non sequiturs. The three sequential sections, "La agonía del Rufián Melancólico," "El poder de las tinieblas," and "Los anarquistas," show this precipitate movement. They deal respectively with the death of Haffner, Elsa's story of her marriage with Erdosain, and Erdosain's meeting with a group of anarchists and counterfeiterers. One has no idea of the temporal relationship of the three sections in terms of actual chronology. The three sections are also demonstrative of the dynamic use of the spatial focus in the last two chapters of the work.

Other sections in these last two chapters, such as the two dealing with the Espila brothers ("El proyecto de Eustaquio Espila" and "Los dos bergantes") seem completely misplaced. The reader has no idea of the temporal relationship of these two sections to the rest of the action. Moreover, the Espila brothers' friendship with Erdosain only indirectly relates them to the main plot line of the work. Neither brother is connected with the secret society in any manner. Their struggle for survival in the streets of Buenos Aires seems curiously incongruous with the rest of the novel.

This feeling of disunity pervades the entire work. Structurally,

Los lanzallamas gives the impression of being a world at war with itself. The effect achieved in this case is a reflection of Arlt's view of contemporary society as expressed in the novel's prologue ("un edificio social que se desmorona inevitablemente"). For Arlt, the urban society of Buenos Aires is a world which is coming apart, it is a chaotic world of multiple facets, and the novel's fragmented structure simulates this social disintegration.

In spite of this lack of a tightly organized exterior structure, Los lanzallamas does possess a certain interior cohesiveness. This interior cohesiveness is based on the similarities between the lives of many of the characters. The Astrólogo says: "En realidad yo, él, vos, todos nosotros estamos al otro lado de la vida. Ladrones, locos, asesinos, prostitutas. Todos somos iguales. Yo, Erdosain, el Buscador de Oro, el Rufián Melancólico, Barsut, todos somos iguales. Conocemos las mismas verdades; es una ley: los hombres que sufren llegan a conocer idénticas verdades. Hasta pueden decirlas casi con las mismas palabras, ..." (p. 24). This statement which comes in the first section of the novel identifies the thematic principle governing the internal patterns interwoven into the fabric of the narration. Superficially the actions of the characters are different, but in essential traits and aspirations they are kindred spirits.

In a general sense the characters are alike, for they all experience the same frustration. Each is unable to effect meaningful change in his life. Each character is alienated from established society ("al otro lado de la vida"), and each is caught in the trap of a meaningless existence. This affinity is in itself sufficient

to give singularity of vision to the diffuse structure of Los lanzallamas. All men are linked by the fact of their suffering. There are, however, more concrete resemblances between the characters.

A recurring motif seen in the lives of all the characters is a desire for a new life, a longing to escape the harsh realities of modern urban life. Many dream of returning to a pastoral, almost idyllic existence. Erdosain and Emilio Espila dream of operating a sawmill on a faraway riverbank (p. 194, p. 154). The other Espila brother, El Sordo, has an analogous dream (p. 221). Haffner, before he is shot, also dreams of fleeing to a "pueblo de campo" with one of his prostitutes so that he can cleanse himself (p. 66). Ergueta feels the need to spend a period of meditation in the mountains so that he can purify himself for his religious duties (p. 226). A similar desire is seen in Elsa who first flees with the captain and then goes to a convent.

The Astrólogo and Hipólita demonstrate the same idea in a different light. Both have already fled the city only to return from their journey with the realization that all attempts to find happiness through a new life are doomed to failure (pp. 17-19). The implication is that the dreams of the other characters about a more meaningful life can never come to pass. The characters are condemned to anguish.

The Astrólogo realizes, however, the insatiable urge of men to seek a new life. He speaks to Barsut of the younger generation: "Quieren romper los moldes de vida, viven angustiados, como si fuera ayer el día en que los echaron del Paraíso. ... Hay una verdad, la verdad de ellos, y su verdad es un sufrimiento que

reclama una tierra nueva, una ley nueva, una felicidad nueva. Sin una tierra nueva, que no hayan infestado los viejos, esa humanidad joven que se está formando no podrá vivir" (p. 202). The Astrólogo's awareness of this desire of the young for a new land makes it possible for him to recruit followers for his revolutionary society. The pastoral life envisioned by the characters is paradoxically analogous to the ultimate goal of the secret society which is the establishment of a reactionary, almost medieval social order in which man's relationship to his fellows and the universe would be defined by a rigid, even oppressive, set of principles. Both goals offer relief from the confusions and complexities of modern urban life and above all, radical change. Both longings imply a return to a simpler age, a return to Paradise as the Astrólogo suggests. They are mythical yearnings that reflect the words of Octavio Paz in El laberinto de la soledad: "Toda revolución tiende a establecer una edad mítica. ... El 'eterno retorno' es uno de los supuestos de casi toda teoría revolucionaria."¹⁷ The Astrólogo has harnessed the characters' yearning for Paradise and channeled it into his revolutionary society.

The tragedy of the characters is that they can never satisfy this mythical yearning for a new life. The world view of the novel recognizes a basic need in man for something better but offers no way to fulfill this need. This is shown in Erdosain whose anguished life functions as a prototypal pattern of the dilemma of all the characters. His discovery that life is "un bloque que tiene la consistencia del acero," his murder of "La Bizca," and his ensuing suicide constitute a negation of life's ultimate value. It is a

hopelessly bleak vision of a world in which nihilism and self-annihilation seem to be the only consistent gestures.

The representative nature of Erdosain's life is revealed through Arlt's characterization techniques. Two of the principal techniques employed are direct and indirect interior monologues. Through these devices the reader is given inside views of the protagonist. As personalizing revelations of Erdosain's psyche these inside views are unconvincing. Rather, Arlt uses interior monologues to express representative qualities and ideas which project beyond the character's individuality to a broader field of reference. Through these inside views of Erdosain, Arlt is able to represent the collective psychological tensions boiling beneath the surface of all the characters.

The prototypal nature of Erdosain's life is first established in Los siete locos when the narrator interprets the protagonist as the incarnation of the anguish of all men:

Su centro de dolor se debatía inútilmente. No encontraba en su alma una sola hendidura por dónde escapar. Erdosain encerraba todo el sufrimiento del mundo, el dolor de la negación del mundo. ... Sentía que no era ya un hombre, sino una llaga cubierta de piel, que se pasmaba y gritaba a cada latido de sus venas. Y sin embargo, vivía. Vivía. Vivía simultáneamente en el alejamiento y en la espantosa proximidad de su cuerpo. El no era ya un organismo envasando sufrimientos, sino algo más inhumano... quizá eso... un monstruo enroscado en sí mismo en el negro vientre de la pieza. Cada capa de oscuridad que descendía de sus párpados era un tejido placentario que lo aislaba más y más del universo de los hombres. Los muros crecían, se elevaban sushiladas de ladrillos, y nuevas cataratas de tinieblas caían a ese cubo donde él yacía enroscado y palpitante como un caracol en una profundidad oceánica. No podía reconocerse... dudaba que él fuera Augusto Remo Erdosain. (p. 74)

The agony of Erdosain's spiritual disorientation, his alienation from himself, and the ensuing loss of personal identity, are all

themes which readily find a broader frame of reference in the world of the novel. In this sense, Erdosain's interior reality functions as a mirror of the preoccupations of the collective society. The linguistic density of the passage, the insistent driving accumulation of image upon image, add to the atmosphere of psychological anguish and tension that Arlt attempts to simulate. It is an appropriate style, for it accurately reflects the dynamic, ever-mounting but unresolved tension that is the essence of the world of the novel.

The symbolic quality of Erdosain's life which is established implicitly in the first novel is made even more emphatic by the Astrólogo in the second novel. We have already seen how this unusual character is able to use the characters' yearning for a better life for his own purposes. This perspective on the problems confronting the other characters, his ability to discern basic similarities where there seem to be none, marks him as a spokesman for the ideological framework of the novel. He is a kind of modern oracle who fulfills a prophetic function. Even his name implies his interpretive role. Thus it is not surprising that he would perceive the symbolic nature of Erdosain's life. In the first section of Los lanzallamas he speaks to Hipólita of the protagonist: "Creo en la sensibilidad de Erdosain. Creo que Erdosain vive por muchos hombres simultáneamente" (pp. 24-25). Later in the novel he confirms this judgment: "Representa (Erdosain) para mí la humanidad que sufre, soñando, con el cuerpo hundido hasta los sobacos en el barro" (p. 71).

It is interesting that the Astrólogo's assertion that all of

the characters are basically the same ("Todos somos iguales. ... Conocemos las mismas verdades. ... Hasta pueden decirlas con las mismas palabras. ...") is confirmed by Arlt's employment of interior monologue to reveal the interior reality of the other characters. They think in the same vein as Erdosain. In a direct interior monologue the reader is given an inside view of the mind of Haffner: "Por otra parte, ¿qué hago aquí, en esta ciudad? Estoy aburrido. Mi vida no tiene objeto. ... 'Cafishear' a una desgraciada no puede ser considerada un objeto en la vida. Nada tiene objeto en la vida, ya lo sé, soy un hombre positivo... pero la luz... ¿Dónde está esa luz? ¿Existe la luz o es una invención de los muertos de hambre?" (p. 64). Outside of the specific reference to procurement, the preoccupations of Haffner--his boredom, his sense of disorientation, and his doubts about the existence of truth and the value of life--could very well be the preoccupations of Erdosain or any of the other characters.

By the same token, the tendency to suppress the uniqueness of the individual in lieu of representative qualities is also shown in Arlt's use of dialogue. Like the interior monologues, dialogue does not reveal individual subtleties of character as much as it conveys the representative themes of the novel. We have already seen how the Astrólogo is often used to interpret the meaning of the action. Likewise, his pronouncements which come either in the form of long monologues or debates with the other characters (his debate with the Abogado or the "Discurso del Astrólogo" in Los siete locos) are expressions of the thematic framework of the novel rather than revelations of the singularity

of the Astrólogo's character. Conversations between the other characters--Erdosain and Haffner in "El sentido religioso de la vida"--have this same rhetorical and depersonalized quality.

The inevitable result of Arlt's characterization techniques is to make ideas take precedence over individuality of character. In general, Arlt treats his characters as individual aspects of a collective character. They are essences instead of autonomous personalities. The general lack of physical description of the characters also adds to this effect. One has no idea of the physical appearance of Erdosain. His presence in the novel is almost atmospheric; it is more akin to poetic imagery than to flesh and blood existence.

The depersonalized nature of each character's psychic reality and his conversation integrates him into a larger context. None of the characters has an autonomous personality. Implicit within this vision of man is the tragic suggestion that the modern urban dweller has lost his sense of personal identity, a circumstance we saw in El juguete rabioso. The individual is limited in his ability to develop his own personality. The ambience of Buenos Aires is seen as a prison in which each character is but a small piece of a tragic collective drama.

Roberto Arlt sets out in Los lanzallamas to present a rather large group of characters as they react to a similar stimulus, life in a twentieth-century urban environment. In order to handle so many characters, he resorts to a structure which is analogous to the cinematic device of space-montage. The employment of a

montage structure makes it possible to present a synthetic view of an extensive area of reality within a limited temporal framework. The use of this type of structure also results in an unbalanced exterior structure; the novel is an amorphous compendium of discontinuous fragments. On the most basic level the fragmented structure and lack of causality in the work reflect the disjointed lives of the characters.

This fragmented structure is in itself sufficient to differentiate Arlt's novel from most of the novels of its epoch. Works like Don Segundo Sombra and Doña Bárbara are fully within the nineteenth-century mode in that their plots proceed chronologically and under the laws of causality (one action logically precipitates another). In comparison, Los lanzallamas proceeds by aggregating seemingly disparate events. Temporal simultaneity of scenes, unexpected changes in the narrative focus, digressions that are seemingly unrelated to the orderly development of plot, show that Arlt refused to control the novel in a conventional sense. The result is an intuitive anticipation of a type of structure that we have come to accept in such novels as Tres tristes tigres and Rayuela.

While Arlt's refusal to control novelistic form results in a structure that anticipates certain contemporary forms, it also brings about some deficiencies in his novel. For example, the section, "Al convento de las carmelitas," in which Elsa recounts her life with Erdosain, adds little to the overall effect of the novel. Likewise, there is a general tendency to be repetitive. For example, while there are several inside views of Erdosain,

there is little change in his basic attitudes as the novel progresses. It is just too much of the same thing.

In spite of the defects found in certain specific aspects of the work, the total effect of Los lanzallamas is powerful. The internal pattern which is woven into the narrative fabric, the recurring motif of the characters' frustrated desire for a new life, gives the novel a cohesive world view which is universal in its implications. The collective drama we see acted out is a depressingly stark commentary on the destructive effects of the big city on the individual. Alienation, anguish, and insanity are the lot of the men who inhabit this absurd world of disintegrating moral values.

Before ending this chapter it should be emphasized that Arlt did conceive of his second and third novels as a single work. In a footnote in Los siete locos he speaks of a sequel which will continue and amplify the characters and events of the first novel,¹⁸ implying that Los lanzallamas was already in the planning stage during the writing of Los siete locos. We may also speculate that Arlt wrote a pair of novels for financial reasons; two novels would earn more money than one. This seems quite likely, since it is known that the author spent most of his life in serious debt.¹⁹ Another reason for believing that the two novels comprise one structure is their structural interdependence. A full understanding of either work is impossible unless one sees it in the light of the other novel. Overall, there is a unity of purpose in Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas, for each novel adds to the world of the other.

Los siete locos is primarily concerned with the examination of one character's existential reaction to his circumstance. In the final analysis, the first novel is Erdosain's story. He is the center of our attention, and it is his life experience that dominates the world of the novel. For our purposes here, it is important to note the rather limited narrative focus of Los siete locos. The reader sees the world as it relates to one man. It is only toward the end of the work that the work gains in breadth. In three sections, "La vida interior," "Sensación de lo subconsciente," and "La revelación," the reader is given inside views of Hipólita, the Astrólogo, and Ergueta. This abrupt broadening of the narrative focus and the momentary shift into the montage technique portends the narrative mode which is characteristic of Los lanzallamas. In this sense, the broadening of the focus toward the end of the first novel creates a structural bridge between Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas. The two works interlock like pieces of a puzzle.

In contrast to Los siete locos, Los lanzallamas captures life through a broad-angle lens. While the first novel focuses on society in its specifics, the second deals with it in generalities. Los lanzallamas is expansive in outlook and is concerned with the broad spectrum of society rather than solely with one individual member of society. As a whole, the two novels move from the representative life of one man to the collective drama of an entire social order. The connecting link between the two works is the life of Erdosain. He is firmly established as a protagonist in the first novel. In the second novel, the reader discovers that Erdosain's

anguish is representative of a general situation. The protagonist becomes an anguished archetype through whom seemingly diverse characters are intimately related. Thus, as the two novels proceed, they grow from within and expand outward, and the effect is to give a broad but singularly consistent vision of a society in torment.

Notes to Chapter III

¹Supra, pp. 45-51.

²The passage begins: "Hablaba sordamente..." Supra, p. 47.

³Roberto Arlt, Los lanzallamas (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 272.
All citations in the text are from this edition.

⁴Wolfgang Kayser, "Origen y crisis de la novela moderna,"
trans. Aurelio Fuentes Rojo, Cultura universitaria, 47 (1955), 38.

⁵Ibid., 18.

⁶Raymond D. Souza, "Language vs. Structure in the Spanish
American Novel," Hispania, 52 (1969), 836.

⁷Anderson-Imbert, Historia, 283.

⁸Carmelo M. Bonet, "La novela," Historia de la literatura
argentina, ed. Rafael Alberto Arrieta, Vol. 4 (Buenos Aires,
1959), 218.

⁹Pío Baroja y Nessi, Memorias: la intuición y el estilo,
(Madrid, 1948), p. 176.

¹⁰Structure here is used in the conventional sense of the exterior
organization of plot and character.

¹¹Souza, 834.

¹²Ibid., 838.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Wylis Sypher, Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York, 1960), pp. 266-67.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁶Robert Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962), pp. 49-50.

¹⁷Octavio Paz, El laberinto de la soledad (Mexico, 1959), p. 129.

¹⁸Los siete locos, p. 121.

¹⁹Gregorich, La novela moderna, 988.

Chapter IV

El amor brujo

El amor brujo (1932), Roberto Arlt's fourth and final novel, is an unusual work in the author's novelistic production. The predominant theme of the novel, the romantic love of a married man and a young teenage schoolgirl, seems pale beside the high-powered metaphysical content of Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas. Not surprisingly, Arlt's critics have disagreed about the merits of El amor brujo.

Raúl Larra has termed Arlt's fourth novel "la más floja de todas sus novelas."¹ In recent years critics have begun to reevaluate the work. Luis Gregorich terms El amor brujo "una de las obras más complejas de Arlt."² Angel Núñez seems to concur with Gregorich's evaluation, for it is the only novel to which he dedicates an entire chapter in his study of Arlt.³

One of the "complexities" Núñez points out in El amor brujo is the organization of the plot. Using the classification of Wolfgang Kayser, Núñez concludes that the structure of the novel is a variation on the typical structure of the love novel--the first enchanting encounter, the sad separation, and the happy reunion of the lovers.⁴ Núñez goes on to say that the structure varies from the love novel structure because the final reunion of Balder and Irene is temporary instead of permanent. Rather than term this

structure "complex" as Núñez does, we view it as one of the more simple and conventional aspects of the novel. For us, El amor brujo represents within the novelistic production of Arlt a return to a more traditional literary form.

By following a more or less standardized structural configuration, that of the love novel, Arlt imposes upon his work an exterior organization that is conventional and transparent. The terrific burst of uncontrolled creative energy found in Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas is not found in El amor brujo. As one reads the fourth novel one has the feeling that the author was in control of his creation and was aware of the type of novel he wanted to write. In this sense, we view El amor brujo as a return to the time-honored principles of balance, unity, and simplicity in characterization and plot structure, rather than as a continuation of the experimental fervor that characterized the preceding two novels. El amor brujo is more in the vein of El juguete rabioso, and coming as it does after Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas, it is like the calm after a storm.

One of the problems raised by El amor brujo is how it should be taken by the reader. Gregorich, whose opinion may be considered typical of most critics, sees the novel as "un estudio del amor tal como se manifiesta en la clase media, articulado en la oposición entre la idealización romántica del ser amado y la realización fraudulenta del matrimonio burgués."⁵ In the light of Gregorich's comment, the work has the sociological intent ("un estudio") of exposing the nature of middle class sex mores. Certainly the novel accomplishes this, although it seems certain that Arlt is intent on

satirizing these mores as opposed to just studying them. The illicit affair between the married Balder and the adolescent Irene, with the connivance of Zulema and the consent of Irene's mother, Señora Loayza, is caricatural in nature. The incredible rantings of Balder about the heroic existence he hopes to realize through his affair with an insipidly demure adolescent constitute a parody of the sentimentality of the traditional love novel.

One of the most evident ironies in the novel is Balder's equating his affair with a heroic quest. An example of such an ironic contrast is found in the section "Antecedentes de un suceso singular." The section deals with Balder's initial encounter with Irene and the ensuing trip on the train to her home in Tigre. Throughout the section there are numerous allusions relating the trip to a heroic quest. For Balder, the journey on the train is a "viaje a lo desconocido."⁶ Irene is compared to a goddess (p. 40) and a fairy (p. 39). Balder tells the young girl that he feels like Adam might have felt had he been able to return to Paradise (p. 42). When the couple arrives at Tigre, it seems to Balder that he is in a faraway city with an almost fairyland quality about it (p. 45).

More allusions are made to the heroic quest in the section "El llamado del camino tenebroso." In this section the married Balder defines for himself the meaning of his decision to pursue his affair with Irene. He believes he is entering into a "camino tenebroso y largo" (p. 138). By pursuing an illicit affair, he perceives himself as embracing evil and thereby breaking with society. Through this voluntary alienation from society, the protagonist hopes to discover an essential truth about man: "Era

necesario, 'imperiosamente necesario' para mí, el recorrido de esa misteriosa trocha de subsuelo humano, donde los pálidos recuerdos subconscientes, los ancestrales monstruosos y los destinos ciegos aguardan para nutrirse de nuestra sangre, que allí les será concedida en profundos vasos" (p. 140). Balder is in quest of his origins, the unconscious memory of the race, and he hopes to accomplish his quest through an affair with Irene. Arlt points out that the heroic myth with which Balder relates his life is the myth of a disobedient prince: "El príncipe Desobediente, a despecho de los consejos de sus Maestros, quiere entrar al camino Prohibido, donde lo acechan innúmeras Tentaciones. Sabe que si no es Fuerte, perecerá entre las fauces de un Monstruo misterioso. El príncipe tiene Fe, se lanza al Camino Tenebroso y vence al Monstruo. De este combate le nace la Sabiduría" (p. 141). Thus we see that the protagonist believes that his love for Irene is of a heroic and mythical magnitude. He considers himself an adventurer into the unknown realm of transcendental values. We believe, however, that the analogy Balder makes between himself and a mythical hero has an ironic effect in the novel. If the affair of Balder and Irene were of mythical proportions, such heroic aspirations would be appropriate. In relation to a weak-willed engineer and a sensual schoolgirl, the ideas of Balder seem ridiculously incongruous. In effect, when one applies the ideas of Balder to the circumstances of the plot, the effect is one of burlesque.

Nevertheless, tragedy is implicit within the ridiculousness of the protagonist's attitude toward an affair with Irene because the very outlandishness of Balder's feelings is a result of the

pervasive and dehumanizing influence of the big city. The protagonist, who lives a boring and meaningless existence as an engineer, has a frustrated and therefore pathetic need for the miraculous and the fantastic to touch his monotonous life. Like Erdosain of Los siete locos, Balder is engaged in a desperate struggle to change his life: "¿En qué consistía lo extraordinario para Balder? Dejar de ser lo que era. ... Lo extraordinario para Balder era despertar un día por efectos de un choque externo, y encontrarse dueño de una voluntad que le permitiera realizar sueños de vida heroica, sin vacilaciones" (pp. 68-69). The protagonist longs to live a meaningful existence of heroic proportions, but unfortunately the only way he can accomplish his dream is to fantasize on the implications of his hoped-for affair with Irene. Like Erdosain, Balder lives in a state of mental disorientation; he is unable to accept the reality of his own life and instead chooses to live in a fantasy world of prodigious happenings.

The tendency of Balder to reject the humdrum reality of his own life and sublimate through fantasizing is a manifestation of the principal conflict of the novel: the conflict between the rational and irrational in man. The novel deals with the age-old duality of the heart and mind, the struggle between man's emotional needs and his reason. Balder is an engineer, a man whose work requires him to approach and understand reality with his reason. Yet, in spite of or, indeed, because of the rational orientation of his professional life, Balder desperately clings to an irrational belief that one day he will experience the miraculous, a prodigious phenomenon that can not be explained rationally. His

chance encounter with Irene fulfills his yearning. He says to her: "... yo esperaba un encuentro como éste, desde la otra vida. Claro, es muy probable que la otra vida no exista, pero si la otra vida no existe, ¿por qué uno alberga convicciones tan absurdas? ... Decime: ¿no te parece absurdo que un hombre que ha estudiado matemáticas y cálculo infinitesimal espere y desee, y tenga la seguridad que un buen día, en un tren, en una calle, en cualquier parte, se encontrará con una mujer... ella y él se miran y de pronto exclaman: '¡Oh, amado mío!...' ¿Por qué esto, Irene... podés decirme, criatura querida, el porqué de esto?" (pp. 39-40). For Balder, his encounter with Irene signifies the introduction of the miraculous into his meaningless life. The allusion to "la otra vida" implies the existence of a reality more meaningful than everyday reality.

On another level, the conflict seen in the protagonist may be termed a conflict between science and faith. As in Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas, science has stripped reality of any transcendental meaning by reducing it to a set of formulas and postulates that have nothing to do with man's deeper needs. In this sense, Balder's work as an engineer cannot satisfy his need for a meaningful existence. In El amor brujo as in all of Arlt's novels, two worlds exist simultaneously and are in constant conflict. The contemporary world of the big city, which is the product of science, is fraught with spiritual and moral disorientation. This meaningless reality is contrasted with the fantasy life of the characters which is a miraculous world where life has meaning and purpose. The tragedy of Arlt's characters is that their need for this other more satisfying reality is always frustrated, and the result is

disorientation and anguish. In order to survive within the dehumanizing confines of the twentieth-century metropolis, they are forced to create a reality based on fantasy. Arlt's three protagonists, Silvio, Erdosain, and Balder, all have dreams of a more fulfilling existence, and in each case these dreams are dashed on the rocklike reality of a world devoid of transcendental significance.

The interplay between faith and science, the heart and the mind, is also revealed through Arlt's handling of point of view in El amor brujo. The work consists of four chapters and an expository prologue, "Balder va en busca del drama." Basically, the four chapters are derivatives of the prologue which introduces the main characters and establishes the principal plot line of the novel.

Within the chapter divisions of the work are three distinct points of view. In the first two chapters the narrator refers to himself as the "cronista." Arlt employs the same device he employed in Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas, but with a different effect, for the "cronista" of El amor brujo does not violate the temporal and spatial limitations of his literal condition. A second point of view is the one used in the expository prologue and the last two chapters. In these parts of the work, the narrator has omniscience in relation to Balder. Instead of narrating from a retrospective point of view, as the "cronista" did, the narrator artistically presents the psychic life of the protagonist. Another noticeable change in these sections of the novel is the shift from the verbal past tense (used by the "cronista") to the present tense. The

third point of view in El amor brujo is that of Balder himself as revealed in his diary. The extracts from the protagonist's diary are interspersed throughout the novel and are especially significant as they relate to the perspective of the "cronista," for the latter speaks with the pragmatic voice of science and reason, while Balder speaks with the voice of faith and irrationalism.

The principal effect of the inclusion of three points of view in El amor brujo is the creation of tension. What we see in the novel are three cognitively inadequate points of view at war with one another for neither of the three narrators can be considered authoritative. The novel addresses itself to man's lack of vision, his inability to fully explain the human condition no matter what his perspective. This cognitive inadequacy is especially evident in the "cronista" who narrates the first two chapters.

The "cronista" does not violate the temporal and spatial limitations of his literal condition. He does not hesitate to inject his own opinions into the narrative, however. Parts of the section "La voluntad tarada," for instance, are practically a discursive essay on bourgeois life in Buenos Aires. After severely criticizing the hypocrisy of this class, the "cronista" concludes the chapter by classifying Balder as a prototypical example of the bourgeoisie: "... uno de los tantos tipos que denominamos 'hombre casado'" (p. 85).

In the section "La vida gris," the "cronista" shows himself to be quite different from Balder in his approach to life; he also reveals the perspective from which he views the action:

Por más apego que se tenga a la concepción materialista de la existencia, no se puede menos de

asombrarse a veces, de la variedad de contradicciones que pone en funcionamiento en el mecanismo psicológico del hombre, la monotonía gris de la ciudad. El individuo, en algunas circunstancias, se afina hacia extrañas direcciones mentales con tal tenuidad, que llega a dudarse si con exclusión de la materia no existe un espíritu sutil, actuando respecto a los sentidos de percepción inmediata, como un detector de acontecimientos futuros.

En Balder, después de alejarse de Irene, desglosamos tres estados de conciencia: Deslumbramiento irreal, angélico; repentino oscurecimiento de la llamarada pasional, y finalmente un resignado cavilar que busca de tranquilizarse apelando a un vaticinio:

--Es mejor que haya pasado esto, porque esa muchacha me iba a complicar la vida.

Tamizándolos con lógica materialista, semejantes estados de ánimo reflejan incongruencia y debilidad de espíritu. (p. 57)

The attitude of the "cronista" in the first paragraph is one of amazement at the "irrational" behavior of the protagonist. He sees the contradictory behavior of Balder, yet he is unable to explain it through logic. There is the implication that the "cronista" is a behaviorist, for he suggests that the irrational nature of Balder can be blamed on the "monotonía gris de la ciudad."

The second paragraph of the passage reveals the nature of the "cronista's" mind. He is highly systematic and "logical" in his approach to life, as evidenced by his enumeration of the "tres estados de conciencia" of Balder's mind. In the final paragraph, he makes a judgment of the protagonist: logically, Balder is mentally unbalanced.

The important thing to note here is the "cronista's" discursive style and extremely careful manner of procedure. He meticulously proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, from a general concept to its specific application to the life of one man.

Nevertheless, in spite of his tendency to favor logic as a means of explaining the human condition, he does admit that logic and reason are at times inadequate tools for explaining human behavior: "Existen en el hombre o en su alma, quizás en el fondo de sus ojos, sentidos con un tal poder de discernimiento, que frente a ellos, la lógica corriente, la psicología de laboratorio, es más primitiva y grosera que el juego de un principiante de quinta categoría de ajedrez comparado con él efectuado en el tablero por un Alekine o un Tartakower" (p. 67). The "cronista" realizes his own inadequacy when faced with the irrational psyche of Balder. The scientific method ("la psicología de laboratorio") which the "cronista" attempts to employ is by his own admission not equal to the task of explaining the nature of the protagonist's mind.

The contrast to the "cronista's" pragmatic approach is the emotional, even irrational outlook of the protagonist. We have already pointed out Balder's equating his illicit affair with a heroic quest voyage. The principal device used to reveal Balder's point of view is his diary. Balder's own impressions provide a counterpoint to the carefully measured tones of the "cronista"; his diary often resembles the irrational ravings of an adolescent experiencing his first love: "--¡Oh, mi hermanita, mi hermanita! ... De un salto había ascendido hasta la celeste atmósfera de irrealdad que subsiste permanentemente entre un hombre y una mujer, entre los cuales aún no se ha producido la desnudez definitiva. Allí era héroe, gigante, dios. Proyectaba y soñaba. ¡Qué no haría por Irene?" (p. 150). These emotional outbursts of the protagonist emphasize his blindness to the reality of the world

around him. Like Erdosain, Balder is unable or unwilling to accept the naked reality of his own life, and in order to compensate he tries to convince himself that his affair with Irene is a manifestation of love in its purest form, when in fact it is simply a typical example of one of many such illicit affairs. His need for a heroic existence charged with emotion is so strong that it prevents him from perceiving the truly petty nature of his actions.

The contrast revealed in the polarity of the points of view of the "cronista" and Balder in his diary reflects the interior conflict of the protagonist who is torn between his rational nature and his emotional need for a meaningful existence. The polarity also reflects the more general conflict between science and faith. The "cronista" of the first two chapters speaks for the twentieth-century rationalist view of reality, while Balder speaks for an emotive, more idealized view of man's condition. The "cronista" emphasizes the commonplace and ultimately meaningless nature of Balder's affair, while the latter emphasizes its singularity and universal significance. In effect, the contrast between these two points of view reflects one of the principal themes found in all of Arlt's novels: the conflict between the twentieth-century secular interpretation of man as opposed to a more emotive and spiritually satisfying interpretation. The question raised is whether man's life has any ultimate significance. It is noteworthy that neither the "cronista" nor the protagonist can respond authoritatively to this question, for both suffer from an inability to explain reality. As in Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas, there is no authoritative voice which can be said to speak for the true

reality of the characters and situations. And, as in the two previous novels, the implication is that the human condition is ultimately an enigma.

In the prologue and in the last two chapters of El amor brujo, the narrative point of view and the style are radically different from those used by the "cronista" in the first two chapters. Whereas the "cronista" employs a rather discursive style and a retrospective point of view, the narrator of the second part of the novel renders the action in the present tense from an omniscient viewpoint. Through direct and indirect interior monologues the reader is given immediate access to the psychic life of the protagonist, something the retrospective "cronista" could not do.

This change in the mode of narration signals a shift in the approach to reality in the novel. In this sense, the change can be justified, for the reader is given an inside view of the protagonist at the moment of his reaction to the stimulus around him, rather than solely a retrospective interpretation of the character. The addition of a third point of view in El amor brujo also reveals Arlt's continuing preoccupation with the nature of truth. In the world of the novel, the truth about the reality of the world of the novel depends upon one's perspective.

Aesthetically, this shift in narrative point of view presents a problem, for the narrative mode of the last two chapters does not stand in clear contrast to the narrative mode of the "cronista." Much of the time the narrator of the second part has all the characteristics of an "objective narrator" as defined by Wellek and Warren.⁷ He presents the events and the psychic life of the

protagonist without mediating commentary which would belie his presence. Yet at other times he resembles the "cronista" by entering into the narrative in short asides to the reader. This mixture of styles becomes an increasingly distracting irritant as the novel progresses.

The section "En nombre de nuestra moral" shows the objective narrator in his best light as he integrates the life of the protagonist and the big city. The inner struggle of the protagonist is contrasted with flashing neon signs. Zulema has just suggested that Balder meet with her husband, Alberto. Balder senses that her offer is an attempt to force him into having an affair with Irene, and he debates with himself whether or not to accept:

Good Year. Los mejores neumáticos.

Good Year. Las mejores cubiertas.

--¿Por qué no?

Un desaliento extraordinario zapa su sensibilidad.

Y en vez de caer en un vacío vertical entrecierra los ojos para percibir grandes arcos concéntricos. Dos caballeros de frac y galera, del brazo, de una jovencita lila con una lata de galletitas bajo el brazo, entran a un corredor de murallas de oro.

--Sin embargo soy el único culpable. Me han ofrecido juego y acepté. Lo grave es que continuaré aceptando juego. Sin embargo aquel beso que me dió... ¿Y si estoy equivocado? El diablo hará el resto. ¿Será éste o no el camino tenebroso? (p. 131)

The effect is to equate the falseness of the life pictured on the sign ("Dos caballeros...") with the falseness of the life of the character. One also receives an impression of the dehumanizing nature of the big city, for the character seems to be an extension of the consumer-oriented ethos of capitalistic society. In a sense, Zulema's offer is analogous to the attempts of the neon advertisements to persuade a buyer in a certain direction. The important thing to realize about the passage is that these impressions are

inferred from the stylistic mode of the narrator. He does not tell us these things, he implies them by setting up an interior-exterior contrast between the character and the reality around him.

At times the narrator of the last two chapters is not nearly so subtle, however. Thus, after showing Balder's ecstatic reaction at the possibility of seeing Irene after two years, the narrator comments: "El juego de azar que permitió a la jovencita comunicarse con él. ... A un hombre que razona de esta manera sería dificultoso convencerlo de que lo que le ocurre es una aventura vulgar. Ciertos seres humanos vivirían disconformes si perdieran su creencia de que 'el más allá' se ocupa de ellos. Balder pertenecía a este grupo de vanidosos, ..." (p. 93). The problem with this aside to the reader is that it is aesthetically inconsistent with the predominant mode of narration in the last two chapters and an unnecessary repetition of a fact the reader already knows from his previous reading. Such personal asides to the reader detract from the narrative merits of the second half of the work.

The satirical intent found in the first half of the work is also found in the second half. The characters embody certain social foibles, and because of this class identification they are reduced to the level of caricature. Zulema and Alberto, friends of Irene, represent a typical middle class marriage in which a scheming woman dominates a stupid and ineffectual male. Irene's family, the Loayzas, an old and respected branch of Argentine aristocracy, is singularly hypocritical, for Irene's mother is more interested in maintaining a facade of social decorum than in assuring the happy marriage of her daughter.

The tone of sarcastic irony with which Arlt presents this formerly aristocratic class is sometimes devastating in its effect. In a scene in which Balder has dinner at the Loayza house, the sentimentalism of the protagonist and Irene is contrasted with the grotesque eating habits of Víctor, Irene's brother. The scene begins with an almost lyrical evocation of the elegance of the dinner party. For Balder the meal seems like a "sinfonía de cordialidad humana" (p. 192). As the scene progresses, however, the elegance degenerates into a discussion of Irene's lack of a good appetite: "¿No es cierto, Balder? La nena está delgada" (p. 194). The increasing vulgarity of the scene culminates when Víctor melts a huge slice of butter in his noodles. A horrified Balder exclaims:

--Pero usted es un bárbaro. Se come toda la manteca solo.
 --¡Oh!, esto no es nada--dice Víctor sonriendo con suficiencia para concentrar la atención del huésped sobre él; y para demostrar toda la manteca que con los tallarines es capaz de comerse, corta otra rebanada del bloque y la disuelve con tenedor en la pasta caliente.
 --¿Y usted come siempre así?
 --Siempre--dice la señora Loayza.
 --Y entonces, ¿cómo es que está tan delgado?
 --Mala respiración--dice la señora Loayza--.
 Hace mucho tiempo que tiene que operarse de la nariz
 ... no quiere ir nunca... (p. 196)

This ironic representation of the middle class serves as a counter-balance to the sentimental nature of the novel's theme. As evidenced in the above quote, the tendency in El amor brujo is to reduce the characters to the level of caricature. Each is a type who contributes to what Balder frequently terms the comedy of the bourgeoisie. Such scenes as this, which portray the boorishness of society, also point out why Balder feels the need to escape

into a world of illusions.

Seen as a whole, El amor brujo can not match Los siete locos- Los lanzallamas in either quality or innovativeness. The work does have its merits, but they tend to be overshadowed by the deficiencies in narrative technique. The variation in aesthetic distance in the second part is an example of such a deficiency. It is interesting that in the famous pair the constant variation in distance contributes to the powerful overall effect of the work. Yet, the same technique when used in El amor brujo is a liability that distracts from the artistic impact of the work.

Notwithstanding its artistic deficiencies, Arlt's fourth novel does manifest many of the themes found in his earlier novels: the unacceptability of the contemporary urban environment, the disorientation from reality of the men who inhabit this world, and the unsuccessful search for a new way of life. In El amor brujo these themes are embodied in Balder, who is similar to though not a carbon copy of Erdosain. The intensity of the anguish suffered by the two characters is qualitatively and quantitatively different. Erdosain's anguish is existential in nature; it is an all-consuming force that ultimately drives the character to suicide. Balder's anguish, on the other hand, seems to be born of a less profound discontentment that is related to his socio-economic position. The distinction between the two characters is a matter of degree rather than substance, of metaphysical overtones rather than concepts themselves. The nihilistic response of Erdosain to the problems of his life is appropriate in the world of the Los siete

locos-Los lanzallamas. Such an action by Balder would be totally out of character. Erdosain is brutally honest with himself; he unequivocally rejects society and the nature of his existence. In this sense, Balder is the weaker of the two, for he finally permits himself to be emasculated by social convention. The end of the novel, in which his reunion with his wife is revealed, implies that the protagonist has decided to return to the meaninglessness of his old ways. Balder's lack of willpower prevents him from fully rebelling against society as Erdosain did. Balder's supposed break with social convention (his affair with Irene) is, according to the "cronista," a commonplace example of a general pattern of social conduct within the Argentine middle class.

El amor brujo views man in his social context rather than in his metaphysical relationship to the universe, as Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas does. Balder and the rest of the characters represent the ethos of a society whose sickness is hypocrisy in all human affairs. They exhibit a slavish obedience to dehumanizing social conventions. There is an implied attempt to make the vision of the novel more universal by employing multiple points of view which embody the more abstract conflict between science and faith. Nevertheless, Balder's identification with his social class is so emphatic that even this potentially universal theme is reduced to a somewhat limited application. Arlt's previously noted propensity for making caricatures of the characters in order to ridicule their social foibles also tends to diminish their effectiveness as psychologically viable personalities. Each character represents a social type, but unfortunately nothing more.

As satire, El amor brujo is moderately successful. It is unlikely, however, that any two readers would agree on exactly what it is Arlt is satirizing. In some cases the satirical intent is evident: the "cronista's" belittling of Balder's belief in the singularity of his affair with Irene or the supposed elegance of the previously noted dinner party. In other cases the author's values are not so clear. Should we take Balder's diary as a serious attempt on Arlt's part to analyze the subtleties of love from a subjective viewpoint, as Gregorich and Núñez have, or should we take the diary as a burlesque of the traditional love novel? If we consider the "cronista's" values as being representative of Arlt's values then we must conclude the latter. The overdrawn sentimentalism of Balder and his belief in the heroic mythical nature of his affair both seem to imply an ironic intent. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine the creator of the unsentimental and hostile worlds of El juguete rabioso and Los siete locos suddenly opting for the adolescent drivel of a fastidious engineer.

Notwithstanding the novel's moderate success as a satire, El amor brujo is the least engaging of Arlt's novels. It lacks the youthful vitality of El juguete rabioso and the dynamic comprehensiveness of Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas. Carmelo Bonet comments that Arlt's fourth novel seems to be "la proliferación de un cuento que hubiera llenado pocas páginas con su asunto trivial y obsesivo."⁸ Although Bonet's criticism may be a bit excessive and does not take into account the novel's satirical intent, we do agree with the essence of his observation. Arlt just does not succeed in holding the reader's interest throughout the novel. The protagonist is too

weak, too superficially temperamental to care about, even as an object of ridicule.

Notes to Chapter IV

¹Larra, Roberto Arlt, p. 36.

²Gregorich, La novela moderna, 1002.

³Núñez, La obra narrativa, pp. 59-95.

⁴Ibid., pp. 74-75.

⁵Gregorich, 1002.

⁶Roberto Arlt, El amor brujo (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 44.

All citations in the text are from this edition.

⁷René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature,
3rd ed. (New York, 1956), p. 223.

⁸Bonet, "La novela," Historia, 220.

Conclusion

Roberto Arlt's four novels, El juguete rabioso (1926), Los siete locos (1929), Los lanzallamas (1932), and El amor brujo (1936), represent an important step in the development of the contemporary Latin American novel and above all in the Argentine novel. The rural, mundonovista concerns of such novels as Don Segundo Sombra and Doña Bárbara are contrasted with the urban, more universal concerns of Arlt's novels. The novels of Güiraldes and Gallegos are accounts of Latin American man's struggle with the tough rural environment that threatened his very survival. They view America in the epic terms of a life-and-death conflict with an untamed land. Such ideas as good and bad, weak and strong, civilization and barbarism, are easily definable in these novels. They give the overall impression that man's struggle with the land is difficult but not hopeless.

Arlt's four novels do not embrace the traditional values and concerns of the novels of Güiraldes and Gallegos. This implicit and perhaps unknowing rejection of the regionalist tradition does not occur simply because Arlt uses the city as the setting for his novels, but rather because the urban environment reveals a radically different theme: the spiritual bankruptcy of twentieth-century society. The anguish found in Buenos Aires is symptomatic of the ills of the modern world, and the array of strange characters who

inhabit this world constitutes a microcosm of contemporary man's existentialist predicament.

Arlt is not interested in the city as a realist might be. He does not usually describe its physical aspects in great detail. He does not simply portray the city as a corrupting influence, as a traditionalist might. Rather, Arlt goes beyond this vision and makes the city a grand metaphor of contemporary man's circumstance. He is concerned with the city as a symbolic projection of the sickness of modern man, and not with the comparative virtues of the urban and rural environments. Buenos Aires exists as atmosphere, as an all-encompassing presence that limits and dehumanizes the men who live in it. For Arlt, the real problem of Latin American man is the psychological derangement caused by technology's growing dominance over every phase of existence, and the big city is the focal point of this crisis; it is at the cross-roads of the forces shaping the contemporary world.

Arlt's first novel, El juguete rabioso, contains many of the elements which characterize all of the author's works. A dehumanizing, spiritually bankrupt urban society and a hyper-sensitive individual are both elements which receive more extensive treatment in his later works. This first novel does differ from the rest of Arlt's novels, however, for the author is more in control of his technique. Possibly because of the influence of Güiraldes, he does not allow his imagination or intuition to have full sway. This results in a novel which is good in the traditionalist sense, but somewhat lacking in thematic projection and technical innovations. In the main, El juguete rabioso is a novel which is linked to the

waning current of Naturalism.

Arlt's second and third novels, Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas, are the author's most significant works. Their meta-physical density and technical diversity mark these two works as fully within the modern tradition. Arlt goes beyond the surface reality of his society and explores the latent moral and spiritual disorientation underlying the everyday happenings of a great city. Because of the universal nature of the anguish he portrays, the two novels have the historical effect of placing the Argentine novel in the mainstream of the avant-garde currents of the 1930's. They represent a literary breakthrough, for they show that Argentine reality is sufficient material for the expression of modern man's circumstance. The problems experienced by the characters could occur in any large Western city.

These two novels are also innovative in the area of technique. The author's personality has a great deal to do with their significance in this context. As a total non-conformist, he was one of the first in Latin America to question established criteria for novel writing. He brings to the novel a down-to-earth vision of things. He has a feeling for the problems of the common man and an ear for his speech, which he incorporates into the dialogue of his novels. His personal relationship with Güiraldes and the writing of El juguete rabioso show he was aware of what a traditional novel should be. Yet Arlt rejects this influence and chooses to write a type of novel which is a highly personal expression of his own vision of reality. He refuses to control his novel, and instead listens to the voice of his own intuition.

The results, as seen in his second and third novels, are works that are innovative in the areas of structure and point of view. Arlt shows that these aspects of technique do not have to conform to a preconceived pattern. Structure is fragmented, especially in the third novel, and this fragmentation reflects the disjointed lives of the characters. A totally chronological structure would be inadequate for the depiction of the spiritual disintegration that is characteristic of twentieth-century society.

Likewise, point of view is a flexible device which reflects the immediate needs of content rather than a preestablished criterion. Through the use of an unreliable narrator Arlt confuses the reader about the limits of fiction and reality in his second and third novels. The reader is left with a feeling of uneasiness, for he can never be sure about the narrator's exact relationship to the reality around him. The reader's uncertainty is analogous to the characters' confusion about the nature of their own lives, for both are denied an unequivocal view of truth. An outgrowth of this confusion is the creation of doubt about moral values. Good and bad are meaningless terms, for in a world of enigmatic properties, all human endeavor leads to nothingness. The ambivalence about the nature of reality and moral values is an important factor which links Arlt to the modern tradition.

Another experimental technique used by Arlt in Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas is interior monologue. He is one of the first to employ this device in Latin America. He uses interior monologue to reveal the inner tensions boiling beneath the surface of his characters. As individualizing revelations of the characters'

personal psychic lives, these inside views are unconvincing, for all the characters think in the same manner about the same things. Nevertheless, the similarity in the psychic lives of the characters, their collective preoccupations and problems as revealed through interior monologue, results in a vision of an entire society in torment. Arlt creates a general atmosphere of psychological tension implying that modern man is a depersonalized and unknowing participant in a collective drama that is taking place at all levels of society.

Arlt's experimentation with structure, point of view, and interior monologue is unsuccessful at times. These techniques were not born of a studied mastery of novelistic theory. Many passages lack craftsmanship. Imagery is often clumsy. Some interior monologues border on the banal. In spite of these deficiencies, Arlt does demonstrate that technique can be radically altered to fit new situations. He shows that intuition can be a reliable guide for technique, and many passages in his novels approach brilliance. He shows that the novel is a flexible genre not necessarily bound to any preconceived form.

Arlt's fourth novel, El amor brujo, can only be considered moderately successful. Because of the control exercised over the technique, it is somewhat similar to El juguete rabioso, but it has neither the power nor the stylistic proficiency of the first novel. The same basic theme of the individual faced with a dehumanizing society is treated, but with less acumen and less creation of pathos in the reader. The frivolous nature of the characters tends to destroy any identification the reader might

have with their situation. In this sense, El amor brujo seems to be an afterthought written without much conviction.

The novelistic production of Arlt marks an important transitional phase in the history of the Latin American novel. The dissatisfaction with society and its traditional art forms, ideas embodied in Arlt's novels, are a necessary step toward the development of new literary structures. Arlt's novels represent an attempt to explore in new ways new areas of reality in order to express what is truly important about society. By viewing Buenos Aires in this manner, he implicitly denies that the problem of Latin American man can be represented in terms of his struggle against the land. Arlt sees in Argentine society evidence of a worldwide crisis of the human spirit brought on by the advent of twentieth-century technology. This intuitive understanding of modern man's predicament and the depiction of it in his novels through innovative techniques is perhaps his major contribution to the development of the contemporary novel in Latin America.

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